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Editorial

This issue of the *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, on the theme of contextual missiology, is the first in a series of three thematic volumes representing different areas of study at IBTS. Projected future volumes will centre on Baptist Identity (Vol. 4:3) and Biblical Studies (Vol. 5:1). Here, we present a wide range of studies and proposals from Baptist scholars and practitioners of Missiology. It features a provocative and stimulating essay by the IBTS Rector, the Revd Keith Jones, and a paper given by Dr Daniel Carro at the Baptist World Alliance ‘Summit on Baptist Mission in the 21st Century’, held in Swanwick, England from 5 - 9 May, 2003. Two IBTS Directors – the Revd Dr Parush Parushev (Academic Dean and Director of Applied Theology) and the Revd Dr Peter Penner (Director of Contextual Missiology) – participated in the Summit and offer reflections on/responses to Carro’s paper. The volume is then rounded off with a critique of Lesslie Newbigin’s *Theology of Mission* by Michael Heneise, a current IBTS MTh student in Contextual Missiology.

The Revd Keith G. Jones’s essay, ‘Towards a Model of Mission for Gathering, Intentional, Convictional *Koinonia*’, is sure to provoke much reflection and discussion amongst Baptists everywhere. In a time when Baptists in many parts of the world are fixated upon numbers and programmes, Jones calls Baptists back to our theological and historical roots and argues that small fellowships where genuine *koinonia* can and does take place, along with the commitment to and sharing of lives with fellow believers, is *the* truly biblical model for the Church. He envisions ‘church growth’ as occurring when “these communities of the street corners. . . the side streets and the apartment blocks. . . break apart to create new gathering churches round the corner and down the street. . .”. Moreover, he advocates essentially a church of the ‘laity’.

One immediately might ask: what are the implications of this model for those engaged in theological education and equipping of leaders? Jones briefly addresses this key question but leaves the door open for further dialogue. This, and many other aspects of his essay will surely inspire Baptists in Europe and in the wider family to reflect, pray and deliberate upon the nature of the Church and mission, as well as the role of theological formation today.

Although Daniel Carro – theological professor at the John Leland Center for Theological Studies in Virginia – is from Argentina and brings to his analysis his Latin American experience, his BWA Summit paper on ‘Challenges to the Christian Mission Today’ applies well to a European

context. He opens with a very powerful story about the 16th century Christian ‘mission’ to the Incas and then draws insightful parallels to contemporary missiological philosophy and practice, commenting upon these and offering coherent suggestions as to a way forward for contemporary missions, whatever the context.

The Revd Dr Parush Parushev begins his response to Carro’s paper with a testimony of his own experience of coming to faith as a Bulgarian from a Communist Party background, and then moves to his theology – inspired by his mentor, the late Dr James Wm. McClendon – of what it means to be a ‘baptistic believer’ *witnessing* for the Kingdom of God. The Revd Dr Peter Penner brings to his reflections not only the depth and breadth of his background as a scholar in the field of Missiology, but his extensive practical experience with mission; thus, his critique of contemporary mission offers many valuable insights for all who seek to live as God’s witnesses today.

With Michael Heneise’s essay, ‘A Critical Evaluation of Lesslie Newbigin’s Theology of Mission in the Light of Western Pluralism’, *JEBS* presents an example of the kind of research, reflection and writing in which IBTS MTh students are engaged. Heneise (himself a child and grandchild of Baptist missionaries to Haiti and Central and Latin America) reflects upon how Newbigin’s theology addresses the challenges facing those engaged in mission today, particularly in pluralist and postmodern contexts, and highlights the ultimate importance of living out one’s faith and convictions in *community*.

These are challenging – yet creative, exciting – times for the Church! In particular, European Baptists must recognise and respond to the questions and needs of the various contexts in which we live and minister. God has promised his Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth and to empower us. How important it is that Baptists in Europe continue to reflect upon what it means to be the Church and to engage in dialogue with each other and others about the implications of that calling and commission. This volume of *JEBS* is certain to assist in promoting these most important goals.

The Revd Dr Cheryl A Brown
Director of Biblical Studies, IBTS

Towards a Model of Mission for Gathering, Intentional, Convictional *Koinonia*

Introduction

In the present state of missiological studies, it is important to examine a range of models from throughout the world and reflect together on what insights might be most helpful in the heart of Europe, where we struggle to make an impact with the message of the good news of Jesus in our post-communist, secularised, post-Christendom¹, postmodern² world. In this short contribution to this special edition of the *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, my intention is to take forward some of the tentative ideas in my earlier reflection on lessons we might learn from the Anabaptists of the radical reformation.³

In that book I introduced the idea of the gathering church⁴ and my conviction that one model of mission that we need to explore is in the development of a true Christo-centric *koinonia*, or community, of faith. Such a community would be one where members are not afraid to look at the roots of believing and are willing to engage in a journey of exploration, committed to the missiological outcomes of their searching and reflection.⁵ Since then, I have been stimulated to further reflection by my colleagues here at IBTS and by my former colleague, Anne Wilkinson-Hayes, who has reflected on the issues and engaged in developing new forms of being church in Europe and Australia.⁶

Writing in 1949, Herbert Butterfield commented

From the time when the conversion of the Emperor Constantine first placed the power of the Roman Empire on the side of Christianity, the history of the churches is beset with anomalies. Indeed, after a period of fifteen hundred years or so we can just about begin to say that at last no man (*sic*) is now a Christian

¹ On the development of Christendom, see Alan Kreider (editor), *The Origins of Christendom in the West* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001).

² For a stimulating reflection on postmodernism and the theological quest, see Nancey Murphy, *The Nordenhaug Lectures 2003*, 'Theology in a Postmodern Age' (Prague: IBTS, 2003).

³ Keith G. Jones, *A Believing Church: Learning from some contemporary Anabaptist and Baptist perspectives* (Didcot: The Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1998).

⁴ This phrase was taken up and developed by Nigel G. Wright in *New Baptists, New Agenda* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002) p. 76ff

⁵ *A Believing Church*, p. 53.

⁶ Anne Wilkinson-Hayes has been involved in developing new forms of church in Oxford, and now as a Superintendent Minister in Australia. See Stuart Murray and Anne Wilkinson-Hayes, *Hope from the Margins: New Ways of Being Church* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2000). See also Mark Pierson, 'Reflections on the Shape of the Church in Postmodern Western Cultures', in *JEBS, Volume three Number 3*, May 2003.

because of government compulsion, or because it is the way to procure favour at court, or because it is necessary in order to qualify for public office, or because public opinion demands conformity, or because he would lose customers if he did not go to church.... We are back for the first time in something like the earliest centuries of Christianity, and those early centuries afford some relevant clues to the kind of attitude to adopt.⁷

Missiologist Wilbert R. Shenk, of the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary, argues that Butterfield's insight was 'brilliant'.⁸ We might well agree with Shenk that the intervening fifty three years have

brought no significant change of trends in the historic churches of Christendom, while, at the same time, the Christian *ecumene* worldwide has continued to make steady gains in Africa, Asia and Latin America, both in numerical strength and in translating the Christian faith into many vernaculars⁹. The multiple centres of Christian vitality are to be found largely outside historical Christendom.¹⁰

So, what is to be done about this? Many of the dinosaurs of the Christian church – the powerful national churches, the historic free and evangelical churches of Europe – still have the mentality of the era of Christendom.¹¹ Do such churches, do *we*, deserve the opportunity to go back to our roots and to those insights which are only half-remembered from the times of the radical reformation, a time when Anabaptists and others were firmly outside the charmed circles of Christendom (whether Catholic, Orthodox or Magisterial Reformation). Can we now work away at clues and insights which might open up radical ways of being church and doing mission in this new century in Europe? As the sociologist Grace Davie says

⁷ Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd, 1949), p. 135. On the Constantinian legacy of Christendom see Nigel G. Wright, *Disavowing Constantine* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999)

⁸ Wilbert R. Shenk, *Write the Vision: The Church Renewed* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1995), p. 99

⁹ On the shift in Christian influence from north to south, see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom – The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁰ *Write the Vision*, pp. 99-100.

¹¹ One example of this might be the western European denominational church-planting strategies of the early 1990s with ambitious targets set, which have now largely run out of steam. See, for instance, Derek J. Allen, *Planted to Grow* (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1994).

It is to everyone's advantage to find appropriate forms of religious life for the new millennium, in other words to affirm healthy mutations in Europe's religious heritage and discourage others.¹²

This is what I seek to do in this short article. My concern is to argue the case for gathering, intentional, convictional communities of radical believers. These communities must have a sense of the 'ortho' lifestyle about them – orthodox, orthopraxis, orthopathy, orthohexy and orthopyre – in so far as they can discern that together from their Christian roots.¹³

Gathering Churches

It seems that the first communities of those who were disciples of, and witnesses to, Jesus, cohered around a Christo-centric affirmation that 'Jesus is Lord'.¹⁴ They met in a variety of places; but essentially they were communities of believers operating within a domestic, rather than a public world. Likewise, the Anabaptist groups who came out of the radical reformation in Switzerland, south Germany, Moravia and the Netherlands were domestic communities. They did not inherit the great cathedrals and town churches that existed,¹⁵ but rather utilised homes, bakeries, warehouses and the open fields to gather for worship.

These New Testament communities understood themselves to be open to how the spirit of God might move them on in their discipleship. They also strove to be, as it were, porous at the edges as people came in touch with them and wanted to know more about the Christ. That is why I find the word 'gathering', rather than 'gathered', helpful. The more common term of the 'gathered church' has a feel of the complete, the settled, the static community about it. The need today is for communities of faith that are open to change, to the insights of new people, to the realistic possibility of moving on.

We might reasonably argue that this open, porous community reflects an important aspect of the ministry of Jesus, where "even the

¹² Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 194.

¹³ Orthodoxy – right belief; orthopraxis – right practice; orthopathy – right affection; orthohexy – right attitude; orthopyre – the right fire. 'Right' is understood in each sense as conforming as closely as possible to the life and teachings of Jesus, perhaps especially focusing on the Sermon on the Mount, and seeking to apply Christo-centric spectacles to the New Testament and its relationship to the life of the church today.

¹⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

¹⁵ A possible exception to this, at least on a temporary basis, might be Balthasar Hubmaier in Mikulov, where the whole town became Anabaptist for a period after 1526. See my *Anabaptists in Bohemia and Moravia from 1520 until the Battle of Bíla Hora* (unpublished seminar paper).

puppies under the table”¹⁶ could receive something of the healing, reconciling ministry of Jesus. In my view, such gathering communities will, essentially, have an ecclesiology which is focused on the committed small core as the ‘church’, but have an open attitude to those who are seekers, or ‘catechumens’, as the early church came to describe them. Like the New Testament churches and the Anabaptist communities of the Reformation era, they will not be isolationist, but will have a strong desire to keep in close touch with other similar communities of faith, and be by nature and conviction, interdependent.¹⁷ Such communities of faith will operate in the domestic scale of things. Only then will they be capable of developing true *koinonia*, of engaging in communal studying of the Word and sharing in the meal.

Intentional Communities

In building this alternative model of missional churches, the use of the word ‘intentional’¹⁸ is important as we begin to see how such churches are to be authentic alternative cultural models against the predominant individualism and hedonistic lifestyle promoted in Europe by the media and popular culture. Whilst the edges of the Church might be porous, allowing people to come close and sample the life of the community, the attractiveness of the *koinonia* experienced will undoubtedly rest on there being a core of those in the Church who are very committed to each other. This core will have a shared understanding of both the gospel message and the particular shape and mission of their specific community. Inevitably, this will be a style of church life that has a greater depth and intensity than the majority of contemporary western evangelical churches of today.

In his humorous essays, C. Northcote Parkinson sought to demonstrate that the perfect number of people to take decisions in, for instance, the cabinet of a parliamentary democracy was between 3 and 21.¹⁹ His point is that to effectively engage together in taking decisions and moving forward in a common aim, the number of people engaged in the activity is crucial. We are not politicians or companies with boards of

¹⁶ Mark 7. 24-37. For an exposition of this passage reflecting a radical Anabaptist way of thinking see Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988).

¹⁷ See my ‘Rethinking Baptist Ecclesiology’ in *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, Volume One, Number 1, September 2000, pp 4-19. This is an important point in an era where some argue strongly the case for autonomy and independence.

¹⁸ Jim McClendon, building on the work of John Howard Yoder, uses the word ‘intentional’ within the development of his narrative theological model to indicate the importance of commitment to a shared journey of discipleship on the way. See James Wm. McClendon Jr, *Systematic Theology: Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986).

¹⁹ See C. Northcote Parkinson ‘Directors and Councils or the Coefficient of Inefficiency’, *Parkinson’s Law* (London: Penguin, 1968) pp 34ff.

directors, though some mega churches behave in that way! Nevertheless, a community of people seeking to understand the mind of Christ must surely know much about each other and be capable of discussing, reflecting and discerning together that which Christ truly intends for them. It follows that true gathering churches will be local groupings “where two or three are gathered”. They will be communities which take note of the type of inner community which Jesus worked with. This inner community consisted of the disciples (learners), both male and female. Therefore, any such community which begins to grow to over forty or fifty people will begin to stretch the possibilities of this type of gathering community.²⁰ Here is an alternative model to that common amongst many western missiologists and ecclesiologists who attempt to make the case for the large scale ‘church’²¹ offering many services and ministries, where more intimate life is experienced in the cell.²²

I want to argue against the so-called cell church model,²³ which still works on the basis of the ‘large’ church with smaller ecclesial-like cells. My assertion is that the basic unit of ecclesiology for a gathering church has to be small enough for real *koinonia*. This is against the prevailing missiological model of much larger units of ‘church’ which can sustain all the typical aspects of the life of contemporary post-Christendom churches. This ‘large’ model was developed during the expansive years of the 19th century when the accent was on clubs and societies as models of human community.²⁴ It has, I believe, atrophied in post-Christendom Europe and may well be a barrier to effective witness.

The gathering *koinonia* will be communities of the street corners, of the side streets and apartment blocks, of the corner shop and the corner pub.²⁵ When the numbers begin to grow, then these interdependent

²⁰ Whilst this might be the norm for an ecclesia, the interdependent nature of these ecclesia does not rule out larger occasional gatherings for worship and celebration, though the normal community for worship should be the smaller covenanted ecclesia.

²¹ My colleague, Dr Parush R. Parushev, asserts that these large churches are not really ‘churches’ at all, but villages.

²² On cells, see Ian M. Fraser, *Many Cells One Body – Stories from Small Christian Communities* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2003).

²³ I recognise that some scholars note the Celtic Church, and John Wesley used the idea of the ‘cell’, or Class Meeting, to good effect. However, I contend that this is not an effective way of promoting the model I am advocating here. In the cell, reliance is still placed on the larger body with traditional leadership, or ‘episcopate’ to provide the authentic ecclesial reality.

²⁴ So many free churches are thought to be failing today because they do not have choirs, Sunday school, youth clubs, various societies, women’s meetings, men’s meetings, etc. With my model, such things are not only unnecessary, they are inappropriate to the gathering church which focuses on one intentional meeting for *koinonia*.

²⁵ An example of Christians taking over and developing such a community in a former public house would be the Furnival Baptist Church in Sheffield, Yorkshire. On starting such a church from the beginning see John Freeman ‘ChurchFromScratch: Scratching the Itch?’ *Anabaptism Today*, Issue 34, October 2003, p. 13ff.

communities will break apart to create new gathering churches round the corner and down the street, adjacent to the next hypermarket or local kindergarten.²⁶

Of course, such gathering churches need an ecclesial form and some description of belief and lifestyle. Within the compass of this article I recognise I am making some shorthand assertions which call for fuller treatment in due course. Given the New Testament and Anabaptist insights I seek to use as my base, the ecclesial and theological form of such communities might be seen to most naturally arise out of the 'baptist' thinking developed most creatively by the late Jim McClendon.²⁷ These communities will not only be orthodox (right belief), by which I mean gathering churches that are always going back to their roots in the New Testament. They will be communities which understand themselves not to be communities of isolation, but gathering churches related to other communities which have held on to the narrative of Jesus and are linked in profound ways to the story and life of those first communities who knew Him in Galilee. They will be communities who intend to live, as best they are able, in continuity with the original groups.²⁸

These gathering churches will also struggle in their discipleship to have orthopraxis. By this I mean that the life of the community will seek to have a continuity with the basic simplicity and drive of the early church, pre the Edict of Milan and the concord with the secular authorities. They will be churches of women and men, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, where status and authority are put to one side for fellowship and discipleship. They will be about building community – not about erecting centres of power in which to meet, but more about true meeting both with Christ and with each other.

I believe these churches will want to have people who enable them to engage in the theological quest; people who are seeped in the story and have drunk from the wells of scholarship²⁹, but who do not seek after the status, power and privilege of much that has attached itself to the role and life of separated ministry – the pastoral 'office'. For many, the enabling

²⁶ For some other examples, see Murray and Wilkinson-Hayes, *Hope from the Margins*.

²⁷ For a discourse on 'baptist' see McClendon, *Systematic Theology: Ethics*, especially the notion that 'then is now' and 'this is that'.

²⁸ Here, I am not arguing for the Tradition, but for that constant searching after the wider and deeper vision that 'then is now' and that though there is no simple or easy correlation, the struggle to understand the story and be faithful in discipleship guards against losing touch with the core of orthodox and orthopractic Christianity as it has been believed over 2000 years. See McClendon, *Systematic Theology: Doctrine*, especially pp. 468ff, and churchly practise, pp. 316ff and 374-85.

²⁹ I am in favour of more theological education, not less. I am anxious about the current trend within European Baptist life which promotes mission, but which makes little reference to theological formation and education for mission. See, for instance, the trend in articles of the European Baptist Press Service.

role will be increasingly that modelled in the Pauline tent-making tradition.³⁰

Convictional Communities

Such churches will need to work hard at holding onto the vision in an alien environment. This requires, first and foremost, a right attitude – orthohexy – to one another. If the disciples are to witness in the world to the vision of God and his Kingdom, and if that is to make sense in a world where so many of the signposts of faith are missing, then their own lives in community and their own ability to support and encourage one another must be of paramount importance. The New Testament communities of faith, and the Anabaptist communities, spent much time in each others' company. This was not in the artificial setting of 'meetings', but in true sharing and supporting of one another. A helpful way to develop such sharing was, in a measure, in communal living, and certainly in the sharing of experiences, telling stories and reflecting on their lives, often in the setting of fellowship meals.³¹

How might we develop such convictional communities today? Certainly not in the limited Sunday contact of many European churches, but perhaps the recovery of gathering around the table to tell the stories of faith, recount the experiences of life, share in the *koinonia* of eating and drinking together. This might help recover a way of *being* church which seriously sustains the travellers of faith as they seek to be disciples and *do* church in the world.

Witnessing Now

Of course, these reflections only deal with the structural realities. It proposes a model of small groups of localised people in a vocation of commitment. This strikes a counterbalance to the globalisation and 'McDonaldization' of society and the institutional church.³² It is also very different from the self-centred individualism of those sat alone in front of the television or computer screen having opted out of face-to-face human

³⁰ How these gathering churches help one another form such enablers deserves more detailed reflection and description. What form of community might serve to help such 'enablers' to learn is something my colleagues and I are engaged in discussing as an important resource for the churches.

³¹ A simple example of this will be seen in reading again how the Jerusalem church lived in Acts 2, and in recognising that though the Corinthian church had troubles, the basic picture painted in the letters of Paul is of a group of people intimately involved with one another and meeting regularly to share meals together.

³² John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Spirituality, Creativity and the Future of the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000).

intercourse – the virtual church that some in the west now engage in. These gathering *koinonia* groups, who share enough of a common vision to allow others to experience, from the edges, what they are about, are the antithesis of the ‘multiple outlets’ supermarket church. They are also in contrast to the hole in the corner or computerised church. Rather, they are groups who find the strength to be engaged faithfully in the world because, over a meal, they both tell to each other that story which compels and attracts and also ‘bear one another’s burdens’.

However, in itself this is not enough. The final ‘ortho’ needs to be there: orthopyre, the fire of the Spirit – she who danced on the heads of the Apostles at Pentecost. This Ruach,³³ or Spirit, of God takes us and, with a compulsion and excitement, draws us into the *Missio Dei*. The Spirit gives us hope that here, in the continent where Christianity blossomed and flourished in the early centuries, there can be, in the first century of this third millennium, hope and faith for those who will trust and follow.

Abandoning Christendom Models

In setting out these provisional parameters of gathering, intentional, convictional communities of *koinonia*, it is clear that there is a discontinuity between many models of the post-reformation church and the model of church being advocated here as a style of church which might re-engage in the missionary task in Europe.

The pattern of church I am advocating focuses on an intensity of relationship and a sharing of convictions which contrasts to the formalised ecclesial organisation of committees and boards and paid professional staff; a passing church of special buildings “trumpeting the message of salvation”³⁴ in a built environment where people have lost the code or clue to what we seek to proclaim. Of course, this abandoning of the purple³⁵ has a high price. We will need to reflect again on how the smaller intentional churches may be enabled to understand their place in the story of the people of God. How can they have amongst them those who have had time,

³³ The Hebrew word for spirit, ‘ruach’ is feminine in form, in itself an interesting issue to explore as we seek to be ‘orthodox’.

³⁴ This phrase was addressed to me by a representative of the preservation body, English Heritage, about a large, redundant and abandoned Baptist chapel in Yorkshire which we wanted to demolish but the conservationists were protesting against. What sort of message of salvation does modern society see in large, badly maintained empty chapel buildings?

³⁵ I am indebted to my friend, Alan Kreider, for pointing out how the colour purple came into the life of the Church with the politicisation of the Church. It is now used as the colour of power and authority amongst ecclesial officials, bishops and the like. I am embarrassed that purple is the colour used by the EBF in their logo and, by derivation, at IBTS on our official signs and in our academic dress. See also Reinhold Meyer, *History of Purple as a Status Symbol in Late Antiquity*, Collection Latomus 116 (Brussels: Latomus, 1970). On the Christian repudiation of purple see, Tertullian, *De Idolotaria*, 18.

space and the opportunity to reflect on the story?³⁶ We must find new ways to assist those with theological formation to contribute to that reflection as enablers in these new ecclesial groupings and avoid the perils of being seen as the paid professional leaders.

We will have to have the courage to walk away from buildings, structures and styles of life which sap our energies and act as barriers to our engagement with society. We may well need to hold a better balance between the declaration of our faith in the formal announcements and statements of the church (orthodoxy) and the intention to live the life which reflects the discipling model of Jesus³⁷ (orthopraxis). As some amongst us seek to explore these dynamics, they, and those who remain within the institutionalised Constantinian Church, will need to have a real measure of orthopathy (right affection) for one another.

The Revd Keith G Jones is Rector at IBTS.

³⁶ We call this initial ministerial formation, but we will need to look again at how learning communities are developed which produce those who have theological skills, but also have the resources to earn their living in other ways and who clearly understand the calling to servant-enabling.

³⁷ I recognise there can be much debate about the content of this model. I am with Glen Stassen, John Howard Yoder and Jim McClendon in wanting to start the search with the Sermon on the Mount. See, for instance, Glen H. Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), and John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

Challenges to the Christian Mission Today

Address delivered at the Baptist World Alliance Summit on Baptist Mission in the 21st Century Tuesday, May 6, 2003

A most interesting chapter in the history of the Christian mission was written almost five hundred years ago in Latin America. It was a tragic one.

In December 1531, Francisco Pizarro and his gang of ruffians – euphemistically called *conquistadores* – came to Tawantisuyu, a quiet place on the Pacific shores of the Inca empire, just a few miles North of the port of Trujillo, Perú. His intention was to meet with the Inca, King Atahualpa. Pizarro wanted to peacefully convince Atahualpa of the need to accept the Christian faith, to surrender his armies and to accommodate to the conditions of Charles V, King of Spain, much as how Cortés had already done with Montezuma in Mexico.

The preparations for the *encuentro*, however, took almost a year, and were not as peaceful and evangelical as some might expect. Atahualpa was advancing through the imperial capital of Cuzco when he learned of the arrival of the white strangers. After an exchange of gifts and messages between the leaders, the two armies advanced to a meeting in the town of Cajamarca, high in the Andes ranges. Pizarro, who was not sure of the outcome of the encounter with Atahualpa, came first and concealed his army in some large buildings opening onto the main square of Cajamarca. Atahualpa and his army came later, entering the town peacefully and confidently. It was the 15th November 1532, “at the hour of vespers”.¹

According to Garcilaso de la Vega, the Inca-Spanish historian, among Pizarro’s crew was *el cura Valverde*, a Spanish priest whose mission was to evangelise the Inca and to convert them to Christianity. Fray Vicente de Valverde had prepared a good message for the occasion. He explained to Atahualpa how one God in three persons had created the universe and our common father Adam; how Adam had fallen into sin, which made the coming of Christ a need for redemption. Christ, however, was despised and killed; yet he rose from the dead and went to glory, not before leaving, in his place, Saint Peter and his successors, the popes who live in Rome. He explained how the pope had divided the world amongst the Christian princes, entrusting each one with the task of conquest, and that this province of Atahualpa’s had been assigned to His Majesty the

¹ Garcilaso de la Vega, *The Incas: The Royal Commentaries of the Inca* (Lima: Librerías ABC, 1979), Note 14, p. 428.

Emperor and King, Don Carlos – Charles V – our master. If Atahualpa chose to believe and receive the waters of baptism, the Emperor would defend and protect him, but if Atahualpa were to refuse, Carlos would fight a cruel war against him with fire and sword. This was, in essence, the message of Valverde.²

However, at the very beginning of the discussions a big problem arose because the priest had to speak through an interpreter. Felipillo – little Philip – the *faraute* or Indian interpreter, was a young lad under twenty years of age, with as little knowledge of the common language of the Incas as he had of Spanish. He had learned Spanish from his dealings with rough soldiers. The best thing he knew how to do was to swear. Regarding Christianity, although he had been baptised, he had received no instruction whatsoever in the Christian faith or the Apostle's creed. Felipillo was a friend of Valverde, but a terrible interpreter.

After the priest had spoken for a long time, not hiding his state of confusion, Atahualpa answered:

Your herald spoke to me of five well-known men, whom I should know about. The first one is the god three and one, which makes four, whom you call the creator of the universe. No doubt he is the same as the one we call Pachacamac, or Viracocha. The second is the one whom you say is the father of the human species, upon whom all other men have laid their sins. You call the third one Jesus Christ, who did not burden his fellow man with his sins, as all other men did, but instead he was killed. The fourth man you call 'Potato' – here we have to remember that the word for 'Pope' and 'Potato' is the same word in Spanish, *papa* –, and the fifth one you call Carlos the omnipotent, governor of the universe, supreme over all, who does not take the four others into consideration.³

As we see, Atahualpa's understanding of the Gospel was quite cluttered! In the terrible confusion Felipillo had created in his mind, Atahualpa continued:

But then, if this Carlos is the prince and lord of the entire world, how is it that the Pope should have had to grant him permission to make war against me and usurp my kingdoms? And if this permission was necessary, this means that the Pope is a greater and more powerful lord than Carlos, and therefore he is the prince of the entire universe. I am surprised that I should have to pay tributes to Carlos and not to the others. You give no reason for this, and I

² Agustín de Zárate, *The Discovery and Conquest of Peru* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 100-105.

³ Garcilaso de la Vega, *Op. Cit.*, p. 392.

myself do not see any that would oblige me to do so. Because if I were obliged, quite frankly, to pay tribute to someone, it seems to me that it would be rather to the first one, the god three and one which makes four, and to Jesus Christ, who never burdened others with his sins, or even to the Pope, who can dispose of my person and of my kingdom to assign them to others. But if you say that I owe nothing to any one of these three, it seems to me I owe even less to Carlos, who was never lord of this land, and has never even seen it.

And even if we were to admit that, having received the Pope's blessing, he really had some rights over me, would it not be just and fair that you should let me know about this before proclaiming threats of war, bloodshed and death? I am neither so foolish nor so unreasonable as not to know how to obey those who exert authority over me by legitimate rights, and justly and reasonably, but, how am I to comply with the desires of the Pope without knowing what they are?

Lastly, to come back to that eminent man, Jesus Christ, who refused to burden others with his sins, I should like to know how he died. Was it from sickness, or at the hands of his enemies? And was he set among the gods before or after his death? I should also like to know if you consider gods these five men whom you hold up to me, and whom you so venerate. For if this be the case, then you have more gods than we have, for we worship no other god than Pachacamac, who is our supreme God, after whom we worship the Sun, whose bride and sister is the Moon.

This is why I would appreciate it exceedingly if a better interpreter would kindly explain these things to me in order that I might understand them and conform to your will.⁴

It is quite evident to us, as it was to Atahualpa, that there was, at least, a problem of communication that Valverde had not been very eager to resolve. Atahualpa, a quite intelligent and bright man, as we can infer from his words, had begun his speech to Valverde that day in these terms:

Despite the fact that you have refused me all the other things that I asked your emissaries, it would at least have given me great pleasure if you had consented to speak to me through a more learned, more accurate, more experienced interpreter than the one you have, because you must know the incomparable value that words take on for anyone who wants to learn about the customs and the civil and political life of another people . . . and how much more pressing still this necessity becomes when the encounter takes place

⁴ Ibid., pp. 392-393.

between persons who come from regions that are so remote from one another as ours are. . . I say this, man of God, because I surmise that your words are quite different from those spoken by this Indian (referring to Felipillo). Indeed, the very reason for our meeting is evidence of this fact. We are here to discuss peace, friendship, and permanent brotherhood, even an alliance between our two bloods, as it was stated by your first emissaries when they came to call on me. But these words that your interpreter has just spoken have a different sound than those, for he only speaks of war and death, of fire and sword, of banishment and destruction, of extinction of the royal blood of the Incas, of alienation of my kingdom, and whether I will or no, of my vassalage to someone whom I do not even know.⁵

It was indeed tragic that Valverde did not pay any attention to the requirements of the Inca for a better interpreter and continued his 'evangelisation' through the not-so-good offices of Felipillo. This ungracious attitude extremely bothered Atahualpa who, all the time, while Felipillo was speaking, could not refrain from uttering out loud *Atac! Atac!*, 'Alas! Alas!'.⁶

In a particular moment of the conversation, while the Spanish soldiers had grown impatient because of the long series of speeches, Atahualpa, who was questioning everything and everyone, came to question the authority of *cura* Valverde himself. The priest answered that his authority came from "the word of God". To prove his point, Valverde handed Atahualpa a copy of the Bible in Latin.⁶ According to Agustín de Zárate, another historian of the conquest of Perú, the Inca took the book in his hands, but he did not marvel either at the letters, or the paper, since for the Incas the book was an unknown cultural artifact. The Incas had never developed a system of writing.

Atahualpa looked at the book attentively, going through its pages. Eventually he put the book to his ears, shaking it hoping to hear the 'word'. He then looked Valverde in the eye and said in a strong voice: "It does not talk to me, I cannot hear anything!" Then, disgusted, he threw the book away. Seeing such a blasphemy, Vicente Valverde, one of the infamous priests of the 'evangelisation' of America, rose and cried: "To arms, Christians! The holy gospel is being trampled under foot! Justice! Vengeance! Up and at these infidels who despise our laws and scorn our friendship."⁷

⁵ Ibid., pp. 391-392

⁶ Actually, it either was the four gospels, a Missal, or a Breviary. Ibid., Note 19, p. 429.

⁷ Zárate, Op. Cit., p. 104.

Of course, the Inca had not rejected the Christian faith nor the theological content of the gospels. He did not even know how to read! The Inca felt cheated, mocked, insulted in his intelligence by this priest's insistence on the authority of this 'word' of God. If this was a 'word', it was not talking to him! But the Spaniards took theological offence. They took Atahualpa captive, and as Garcilaso informs us, "They killed more than five thousand of his people that day in Cajamarca, among whom there were more than fifteen hundred old people, women and children who had come out of curiosity to be present at this unprecedented meeting".⁸

I have extensively related this piece of the history of the conquest of America because it clearly shows how, in many respects, the Christian mission at the beginning of the 21st Century still resembles the tenets of Valverde and how the Bible can be misused as an instrument of oppression and destruction. That day Atahualpa learned that he should beware when dealing with cultural objects loaded with theological significance. By the way, it is not clear to us, on reading the comments of Garcilaso, who was the cultured one and who the barbarian in the conversation between *el cura* Valverde and *el Inca* Atahualpa. At least it is very evident that Valverde was living in one world and Atahualpa in a completely different one, and that these two worlds did not communicate with each other.

This is one of the greatest truths that has become apparent in recent decades – and we still find it difficult to admit it: we are all biased. There is not such a thing as an unbiased interpretation, an unbiased thought, an unbiased reading, or an unbiased way of life. All of us are unavoidably immersed in a particular worldview, in a definite ideology, in a way of thinking and living that is ours either by donation or by acquisition.

Whether we like it or not, consciously or unconsciously, all of us think, live, act, dream, cry and laugh according to certain parameters of life which underlie the formal and visible structures of thought and action. They are the "mental habits" or "controlling principles", as Erwin Panofsky called them in his analysis of the architecture of Gothic cathedrals;⁹ the "synthetic intuitions" or "signifying connections" of Wilhelm Dilthey;¹⁰ the "underlying general structure" in the wording of Claude Lévi-Strauss;¹¹ the "Gestalts" in the vocabulary of the German psychologists Wertheimer, Köhler and Koffka;¹² and, in the hermeneutical movement, the "pre-

⁸ Garcilaso de la Vega, *Op. Cit.*, p. 400.

⁹ Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (New York, Meridian Books: 1951), pp. 21, 30.

¹⁰ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Teoría de las Concepciones del Mundo* (México, F.C.E.: 1954), pp. 112-114, 116-117.

¹¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Antropología Estructural* (Buenos Aires, Eudeba: 1970), pp. 31-32.

¹² As described, for instance, in F. Dorsch, *Diccionario de Psicología* (Barcelona: Herder, 1895), pp. 375-376; or M. Popp, *Los Conceptos Fundamentales de Psicología* (Barcelona: Herder, 1989), pp. 55-57.

understanding”.¹³ These are principles by virtue of which we order our actions, we arrange our ideas, we control everything and anything that can be known and managed in a particular way of being.

For instance, every way of thinking, be that modern or postmodern – as our contemporary society is accustomed to being called today – is governed by the idea of historical evolution. That identification is made without our having necessarily read the works of any expositors of evolutionist ideas. All of us declare that a certain child needs vitamins without having studied biochemistry. We refer to allergies without a specific knowledge of medicine. We speak of maternal fixations and inferiority complexes without having studied psychology.

The truth of the matter is that even though we have not read or studied every domain of our age, we have certainly lived through the spirit of our times. We have gone to school and gone to church, we have read the paper, we have watched television, we have listened to lectures, sermons, concerts, we have witnessed theatrical plays, we have visited art galleries, we have attended social functions, we have been a part of the one thousand and one manifestations of the culture in which we are immersed.

It is clearer today than ever before that all of us human beings understand everything and anything from within our hermeneutical horizon. What does not come into our horizon of understanding we cannot translate into reality, however badly we might try. What does not converse with the spirit of the times is simply ignored by the people who inhabit those times.

This quite recent discovery has not put us on a pedestal, as one might think. On the contrary, it has hit the human race with a new and irreversible humiliation.

It was Sigmund Freud, the German neuropsychologist and inventor of psychoanalysis, who enlisted three humiliations that we humans have suffered. Copernicus produced us the first humiliation when he discovered that the earth was not the centre of the universe. Copernicus destroyed the narcissist illusion that the human habitat stood in the centre of everything,

¹³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), §32, pp. 139-144. See also Emerich Coreth, *Cuestiones Fundamentales de Hermenéutica* (Barcelona: Herder, 1972), pp. 20-24, 113-117; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Verdad y Método* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1977), Chapter 9, pp. 331 ff.; Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1976), pp. 71 ff.; or Jacques Derrida, *De La Gramatología* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1971), pp. 84-85.

and everything revolved around it. This was called, by Freud, the “cosmological blow”.¹⁴

Later, it was Charles Darwin who, with his theory of the evolution of the species, according to the principle of natural selection, added a new humiliation to humankind, the “biological blow to human narcissism” as Freud called it.¹⁵ From Darwin on, we humans could not pretend anymore to find ourselves disconnected from the animal kingdom.

Sigmund Freud himself asserted a new hit against human pretensions when he discovered the unconscious. “The third blow, which is psychological in nature, is probably the most wounding”, he writes.¹⁶ Thanks to Freud, we humans discovered not only that we are not the centre of the universe, nor essentially different from the rest of nature, but that we are not even owners of our own selves, because many things happen in our interior that are not manifested to us by our own consciences.

In recent decades, it has been the hermeneutical movement that produced a new humiliation: modern science, with its pretended objectivity and impartiality inspired by Newtonian theory and empiricism, had made us think that, with a little time and effort, human beings would come to possess the last word regarding the universe, nature, God and ourselves, that is, everything we can think of. The hermeneutical movement did away with these pretensions, making us aware that the etymological root of the name we bare – ‘human’ – is derived from *humus* (soil, dust), as declared by the biblical aphorism: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19). This we might call the ‘hermeneutical’ humiliation.

This hermeneutical relativisation, preannounced in science by Albert Einstein¹⁷ and in the humanities by Claude Lévi-Strauss,¹⁸ has demonstrated that, according to the objectifying pretensions of modern science, we human beings not only do not know things as we should, but are not even in a position to formulate adequately the problem of knowledge.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, ‘One of the Difficulties of Psycho-Analysis’ (1917), in *Collected Papers*, Vol. IV (New York: Basic Books, 1959), p. 351.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 352. For views on these ‘humiliations’ of Freud, see Helmut Thielicke, *Esencia del Hombre: Ensayo de Antropología Cristiana* (Barcelona: Herder, 1985), pp. 43-46, and Max Scheler, *El Puesto del Hombre en el Cosmos* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1938), pp. 74-79.

¹⁷ Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and the General Theory* (New York: Crown, 1961), *passim*.

¹⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), *passim*; *The Naked Man: Introduction to Mythology*: 4 (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 627; *Myth and Meaning* (New York: Schocken, 1979), pp. 8-12. For a discussion on the relation between structuralism, hermeneutics and anthropology, see Paul Ricoeur, *Hermenéutica y Estructuralismo* (Buenos Aires: Megápolis, 1975), specially chapter 2, ‘Estructura y Hermenéutica’, where Ricoeur enters into a lengthy discussion of the importance of the work of Lévi-Strauss for a hermeneutical theory.

In other words, the hermeneutical movement has shown us that the human incapacity for reducing to words the essence of things, be that the world, nature, God, or the mission of the Church, is more than a mere momentary incapacity that will be resolved with the passing of time and with greater effort. All of us carry in our intimate being an intellectual incapacity relative to our humble human condition that is clearly manifested in the fact that we can see only those things that fall within the limits of our interpretative horizon, that we can see things from only one perspective at a time, and that we can think of them only within our own categories of thought. So, when we ask about the essence of the world, of nature, of ourselves, of the Christian mission, of a biblical text, or whatever, we are also asking circularly about our own pre-understanding, about those “controlling principles”, or about the “underlying general structure”, whatever we want to call them. This circularity of thought is what the hermeneutical movement calls “the hermeneutical circle” or, as others have called it to recover the dynamic and always fruitful nature of the circle, “hermeneutical circulation”¹⁹ or “hermeneutical spiral”.²⁰ From this circular interpretation we make sense out of the world, of life, of history, of destiny; and also we make sense of the Christian mission and the word of God.

It is natural to think, however, that at least the Bible, the written word of God, should remain outside of this compromise with the human nature so as not to be tainted with imperfection and finitude. This “perfect treasure of divine instruction”, as some of our confessions of faith define it, cannot lie so prosaically in the hands of imperfect humans. Nonetheless, our same confessions declare that this word of God “was written by men . . . inspired by God”. It is true that they were inspired, but this does not deny that at the same time they remained human.

The Bible is not like the Book of Mormon, delivered by an angel and copied by a man. The very nature of the Bible is enmeshed with the personal stories of those who wrote its multifaceted pages. In the Bible, God’s ‘story’ is involved with the human ‘story’; the word of God becomes immanent from the words of the people.

Unless we discover the meaning of the immanent action of God in history – past, present and future – and unless we interpret the word of God in the light of the actions of God from within and between the lines of

¹⁹ For instance, Severino Croatto, *Hermenéutica Bíblica: Para una Teoría de la Lectura Como Producción de Sentido* (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1984) p. 45.

²⁰ For instance, Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1991).

history, we will never understand the meaning of the word of God for our day, or the meaning of the Christian mission.

God is the God of history. Christian mission is *missio Dei*, accomplished within history by sinful human beings. God is totally compromised in our historical adventures and commitments. Especially, God became human history in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the word of God incarnate. Jesus is *Emmanuel*, God made history among us, God made a true man – blood, sweat and tears. He suffered, wept and laughed. He was “tempted in every respect as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). He was God reconciling a lost humanity to himself (2 Co 5:19). This is the everlasting nature of the Christian mission: to become the word of God incarnate in flesh and blood, as Jesus was.

What is most amazing about the humiliations we have suffered as humans is that they have not made us more humble. On the contrary, we have chosen to ignore them, as if by closing our eyes the reality would disappear. As sad as it sounds, there are still many people living in Flatland. Many people still think and act as if the whole world revolves around them. Many Christians have not yet internalised the biological or psychological humiliations, much less the hermeneutical one. There are Christians who are not yet aware that our interpretations of the word of God either reveal or conceal the very essence and love of God. There are Christians who are not aware that we have been given the keys to the kingdom, that we can open or we can close, that we carry a great responsibility and obligation toward God for the evangelisation of the world. Unbelievable as it might seem, there are still Christians whose methods of evangelisation and mission do not differ much from that of *cura Valverde* with Atahualpa.

The path of the Christian mission at the beginning of the third millennium is divided into two opposing ways: it is either the path of domination or the path of liberation. If we follow the path of domination, as Valverde did, we might help advance the ways of the empire, but we will not deliver God’s salvation. Only by following the path of liberation will structures and individuals be freed to follow the ways of God.

The challenges for the Christian mission are not so much the external challenges of the world situation – globalisation, poverty, hunger, political strife, war, disease – but the internal challenges. Our first mission field is not ‘they’, it is ‘we’. We need evangelisation in order to evangelise. There are too many grey areas in our following of Christ that need to be evangelised. There are many realities in our churches that are still not controlled by the Holy Spirit. How do we position ourselves in God’s

mission today; how much are we truly proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord instead of our own ways of being Christian (2 Co. 4:5); how are we using the principles and methods of Jesus for the mission; and how are we interpreting the word of God for our generation? All these are open questions for a liberating Christian mission.

We must not fear relativities. The Christian mission has always been, and still is, in continual reinterpretation and readjustment. We cannot take mission for granted. Whether or not our churches will have a mission in the 21st Century is still an open question. Yet, whatever and however that mission might be expressed, if liberating, it will be incarnational. Solidarity and participation are deep structures that our churches need to recover for themselves. As it was true for Jesus, our churches are not here “to be served, but to serve, and to give [their] life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:46).

All imperialistic pretensions have to be abandoned, all ethnocentrisms have to be challenged, all bigotry and xenophobia have to be opposed, all forms of sexism, all discrimination, and all forms of domination have to be outcast. Our churches will have to overcome the ideological trap that has identified Christianity with the Western world. Our churches will have to overcome the geopolitical barriers that have made it almost impossible to be a Christian in certain areas of the world. Our churches will have to overcome the missiological structures that have made us slaves of our own methods and views, or we will become an irrelevant institution for the life of the world.

There are only two ways for the Christian mission today: the way of domination or the way of liberation. The way of domination follows the way of dogmatism, the way of the letter, the way of power-minded interpretations. The way of liberation is the way of freedom, the way of the Spirit, the way of the multifaceted manners in which people may have an encounter with God, repentance and reconciliation.

The problem of Valverde with the Inca Atahualpa was that Valverde wanted the Inca converted to Christianity for the wrong reasons. He was not interested in the salvation of Atahualpa and his people. Valverde did not want to become like Atahualpa in order to show him the ways of the Lord. Valverde was only interested in the Hispanic conquest of America. Valverde was more interested in advancing the cause of the empire than advancing the cause of Christ.

The way of liberation, however, is the way of God who, in Jesus, gets involved with humanity to show mercy and grace, dying for us on the cross so that we might find redemption and new life.

This is the way the Christian mission should follow today. If we Christians are to convince anyone of the importance of the Gospel, we will need to identify ourselves with them, to live as they live, to suffer what they suffer and *as* they suffer, so they might see our humanity and our genuine interest in their human existence, in order that they might find a way to the Father who is in heaven.

This is what Jesus did. Jesus did not come to dominate and rule the world. He came “to seek and to save that which had been lost” (Luke 19:10), to liberate us and our circumstances. He identified with us because he loved us “to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). This is the hermeneutical circulation that is needed, this is the true incarnation that can bring life to the world, and life abundant.

The Gospel and the Bible can be either instruments of domination or instruments of liberation. We decide. God will judge.

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Presence and Witness: Facing the Challenges to Christian Mission Today

Introduction

Let me outline the flow of Dr Daniel Carro's argument in his paper as I see it. The narrative at the beginning of the paper is instructive and does make a point. One may think of different ways in which a community may grow. One way is by natural growth, conversion and persuasion; the other is by coercion, conquest and domination. The institutions of the Church through the past two millennia have employed all of the above. Right from the start, Carro confronts us with the question: which ways are genuinely Christian?

Next, he presents a general survey of the challenges of the hermeneutical turns in the Church's history, especially at the dawn of modernity. Carro rightfully points out (pp.18ff) that the world seen through the eyes of Christian convictions and the world seen otherwise are two different realities. Moreover, attempts to communicate the Christian worldview on purely epistemological grounds – by reason alone – so far have failed; and there is little hope that this can be done successfully. Standing on epistemological grounds alone, the Church is always on the losing side. It does not mean that faith cannot be expressed, or communicated, or argued in rational terms as in classical apologetics. What it does mean is that this is not all that Christian faith is about. If so, what is mission?

In the conclusion (p21ff), Carro challenges the Church's integrity in engaging with the missionary task, juxtaposing mission as domination and mission as liberation and siding with the latter. In his view, it is here that 'Christian' and 'mission' converge. The question is: how do the structure and the content of the mission calling of the Church relate to each other?

Let me add at this point some comments to Carro's proposal, coming from my own experience, for, as with most of you, my understanding of the nature of missionary activity is not purely academic. It is informed by my experience as much as by my reflections.

The Power of Witness: An Introspect

I would like to begin with the narrative part of the paper. According to others, I was considered to be a promising researcher in the field of 'hard' science in the 1970s and 80s. I had been invited to lecture at many international gatherings of scientists and academics. In the early 1980s, I

visited Poland for the first time. It happened that I was in Krakow during the graduation of that year's class of young Roman Catholic priests and theologians of the Theological Faculty of Krakow University. Up to that point my life had been embedded in the experience of three generations of convinced Communists and seemingly guided by rationality and reason. For the first time, I was forced to realise that there were a number of people who did not hold to the Communist idea and who, whilst living in a socialist society, genuinely professed belief in a different reality. They believed so sincerely and so wholeheartedly, over against all the rational arguments that their beliefs should not exist, that it was not easy to ignore their witness. They gathered in that city in large numbers – most of them coming by foot from the most distant parts of Poland, during the winter, on the yearly pilgrimage to Krakow – as the utmost profession of their faith and as a sacrifice to God in whom they believed.

This graduation event was also a public and political expression of support for the Roman Catholic Church in one of the most difficult periods of Polish post-World War II history. The beginning of the 1980s was marked by the most violent and oppressive actions of the Communist government against the Polish trade-unionist freedom movement, *Solidarnost*, a movement that had developed largely in and through the structure of the Roman Catholic Church. This vibrant and active Catholic community attracted my attention to a different way of life, a way more meaningful and morally-appealing than that of the rest of Communist society. It was a prime example of a counter-culture and at the same time a contextual corporate witness against the grain of a dominant public ideology.

Returning to Carro's example in the narrative (pp.14-18), what does it take for the structure which aligned itself with the most domineering and abusive powers in one part of the world to become a redemptive structure in another part of the world? What does it say for the Church in power and the Church under power? What is the lesson to be learned from the Church's need to be redeemed from her own seduction to power before she can be an agent of liberation in the world?¹

If Reinhold Niebuhr is right, corporate structures tend to be self-centred, self-serving, and power-driven.² (Think of how much of our

¹ For a theology of mission that takes a careful note of the liberating role of mission, see J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999), *passim*.

² Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1932 (1960 by Simon & Schuster)), pp. 9, 89, and *passim*. For an insightful analysis from a Baptist perspective of the practises of the church as power practices, see James Wm McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology. Volume I* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, (1986), revised and enlarged edition 2002), pp. 178-189.

churches' budgets are spent on 'the body of Christ' and how proportionately little on 'the vision of the Kingdom of Christ').

Yet, corporate witness, as important as it is, is not enough. In the case of my wife and myself, there was a missing ingredient for us to make a leap of faith in the conversion process. It was the corporate witness of the Polish believers that planted the seeds but the blossoming of faith came after a personal witness, which made the biblical story alive and tangible to us in terms of our immediate life-experience. Faith and mission always have a personal witnessing face. Even in a culturally Christian context, it takes time to discover and trust that face. In our case, it was the face of a Bulgarian woman by the name of Fikija Apostolova, who lived out her beliefs in spite of all odds in a way that brought new meaning in her life and made a difference in the lives of those around her. Through her witness, we discovered the Church, not as a structure or institution, but as a community.

However, even the faithful witness of a genuine believer, adding to the credibility of the visible presence of the community of faith, is still not enough for the conversion process to begin its redeeming work. The pilgrimage of faith is guided by a series of signposts by which corporate and personal witness marks the preparation for conversion. But it is one's mysterious, personal experience of the power of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God which imparts the new life in Christ in the believer's heart and mind, thus, the *metanoia*, the conversion.³ It makes possible the next steps in a Christian pilgrim's journey: the continuous transformation and growing in Christ-likeness, which is the essence of discipleship and witness. The ever-repeating cycle of preparation for mission – marked by personal and corporate witness to the culture, through conversion and nurturing of disciples to their maturity for socially-relevant witnessing – lies at the core of Christian mission, as I understand it.⁴

What is Christian about Mission?

It is amazing that two thousand years later, committed followers are still trying to make sense of the Master's vision in every generation. I will not even attempt to map the quest. I would rather sketch a possible response

³ For some testimonies of the critical role of the examination of one's nominal or inherited convictions confronted by authentic Christian living and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, see in Mike Yakonelli (gen. ed.), *Stories of Emergence: Moving from Absolute to Authentic* (Grand Rapids: Emergent YS with Zondervan, 2003), *passim*.

⁴ For a somewhat similar holistic paradigm in the theology of mission, cf. Bernhard Ott, *Beyond Fragmentation: Integrating Mission and Theological Education. A Critical Assessment of Some Recent Developments in Evangelical Theological Education* (Carlisle: Regnum Books International with Paternoster Publishing, 2001), pp. 103-149.

following in the steps of those who have walked the theological path before me, calling for a radical discipleship of Christ.⁵

Christianity is a vision and a reality. It is a vision acquired by faith and made real by the life and witness⁶ of those who hold it dear. It is the vision of the Kingdom of God and God's reign in Christ. The prophets of God's people, most profoundly the prophet Isaiah, envisioned the Kingdom's distinctive features.⁷ It is the vision and the experience of light and freedom in God's presence, under God's reign; it is the assurance of salvific power and newness that comes in Christ. It comes with a call for peace and justice, for love, care, and embrace for one's neighbour – created in the image of the King of the Kingdom – and for all God's creation.

Christianity is a living reality, itself a storied culture; and its essence is captured by the biblical metaphors mentioned above. The reality of the Kingdom is endorsed and enacted in the life and ministry of Jesus, the Christ; and he emphatically commands his disciples to live out that reality. Christ's vision and the radical politics of the Kingdom are best articulated in the Matthean and Lukan accounts of the teacher's best-known public speeches – the Sermons.

For the radical followers of Christ it is not a hermeneutical circle of endless interpretations in a search for meaning, which Carro refers to in his paper (p.21). It is a bifocal, linear perspective from the cross to the *eschaton*, the baptist perspectivist vision of 'this is that' and 'then is now'.⁸ One focus is in the biblical narrative of the crucified and resurrected Christ.

⁵ In reference to this distinctive type of Christian theologising of the adherents of the Radical Reformation, see e.g. the works of John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, (1972) 1993); James Wm. McClendon, Jr. and James Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism* (Trinity Press International, 1994; revised version of *Understanding Religious Convictions* in Notre Dame: University Press, 1974); James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Ethics, volume I; Doctrine, volume II; Witness, volume III* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986-2002); Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University Press, 1981) and his *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Ibid., 1983); Glen H. Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); Glen H Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996); Rodney Clapps, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

⁶ On mission as witness of the faithful and truthful church in the world, see McClendon, *Witness* 2000, pp. 18 ff. and ch. 9, *passim*.

⁷ In their recent work *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), Glen Stassen and David Gushee provide a persuasive analysis of the formative role of Isaiah's prophetic vision for Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

⁸ On this expression of a baptistic vision, see McClendon, *Ethics* 2002, pp. 26-34. Specifics of the baptistic theological perspectivism, outlined in the works of John Howard Yoder and James Wm. McClendon, Jr., were discussed in Prague, Czech Republic at an IBTS Directors' Conference in Applied Theology, 'Doing Constructive Theologies in a baptistic Way', June 18-24, 2003, jointly moderated by Dr Parush R Parushev and Dr Nigel G Wright. A publication of proceedings of the conference papers is forthcoming.

The community now looks backward, as in a mirror, to find itself in the biblical narrative and to compare the life of the community today with the life of the primitive community. The community also looks forward to the eschatological future for an eschatological verification of its present moral life and aspirations. This is the second focus to form a hermeneutical trajectory. It is a hermeneutical perspective that has a verifier called the *parousia*, or the eternal Kingdom of God coming in Christ.⁹ It is the shared awareness of the present Christian community as the primitive community and the eschatological community. In short: “[T]he church now is the primitive church and the church on the judgment day”.¹⁰ The baptistic vision is the hermeneutical key to both the Church and the Bible. It is a reading strategy by which the Bible is understood and made alive in the Church. This reading strategy presents to the believing community a way out of the relativism (or hermeneutical humiliation, to use Carro’s terminology [p.22]) of philosophical hermeneutics.

The tension of living in these two realities – partially in the reality of the Kingdom now and partially in the expectation of the coming fullness of the Kingdom of God – marks the true life of the adherents of the Radical Reformation (in other words, baptistic communities). Baptistic visionary living is confronted daily by a different and largely hostile reality, called ‘the world’. Mission, then, properly understood, is a witness – enabled by the Holy Spirit and supported by the Word of God – to that vision, a vision for the reality of the Kingdom in the world without hope. This takes us to the concern expressed in the last part of Carro’s paper (p.22ff.): Where does mission begin?

What is Christian Mission?

One may be surprised to find that there is scarcely any direct reference to ‘mission’ in the original languages of the Bible (which does not mean that the concept is lacking). It might be one reason why biblical scholars and academic theologians pay little attention to the intra-cultural and cross-cultural missiological emphases of the Kingdom’s message. “This weakness, in its turn, determines the content of preaching and teaching in

⁹ The concept of eschatological verification (and the significance of the Kingdom of God for that concept) is in continuation with Basil Mitchell’s line of thought on verification of religious experience (see his ‘Theology and Falsification’, in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, eds. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM Press, 1955), p. 103 ff). It was further developed by John H. Hick originally in ‘Theology and Verification’, *Theology Today*, XVII, No. 1 (April 1960), p. 18 ff. For a short account of eschatological verification, see his *Philosophy of Religion*, third edition (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1983), pp. 100-6.

¹⁰ McClendon, *Ethics* 2002, p. 30.

our churches, as well as the content of Bible-reading notes, devotional Christian books and other literature.”¹¹

On the other hand, the notion of calling is present. In the biblical narrative are numerous stories about biblical heroes and heroines of faith who were commanded by God to perform certain tasks. These narratives indicate that calling is not about a person on his or her *own* mission; it is above all *God's* mission, in which God's people are co-missionaries with God in spreading the good news of the Kingdom.

At the biblical root of Christian mission is the well-known ‘Great Commission’ (Matt. 28:16-20), which I see in the following way:

- A missionary church is first and foremost a worshipping community, recognising the divine authority of Jesus, the Christ.
- It is a dynamic community engaged in outreach. It is not a community for its own sake.
- The purpose of outreach is to make disciples and initiate them into the mysteries of the Trinity. It is not proclamation alone.
- The measure of true discipleship is incarnational observance of the Christian way of life.
- It is not solely about an intellectual appropriation of some counter-cultural teaching. True Christian discipleship is an initiation into and a willing embrace of a certain form of life in obedience to God, who is revealed in and through Jesus Christ.

I see a certain progression in the development of any church mission. When I think of mission, I think of integrity, witness, presence and transformation, in line with Matt. 28:16-20. It begins with discipling, with *integrity* of the Christian character. Thus understood, the “first mission field” is us, (p.22). As I have argued above, to engage in mission is to *witness* to the living reality of God's Kingdom and the new creation in Christ. Mission expresses itself in personal and corporate witness, in the ‘living out’ of what a person or a community believes. It is about being an authentic living testimony – the *presence* of a Christian pilgrim and of the pilgrim's community in the midst of cultural despair, a transparent witness for a watching world, i.e., “for the nations”.¹² Finally, mission is a ministry

¹¹ Martin Goldsmith, *Good News for All Nations: Mission at the Heart of the New Testament* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002), p. 5.

¹² A theme argued by the late John Howard Yoder throughout his writings and most persuasively in *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1994) and in the collection of his thoughts in *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

of involvement in *transformation* and redemption of the world by the prophetic, apostolic, and pastoral work of the believing community.¹³ Mission is holistic¹⁴ and dynamic. It is embedded in the very practises of the community's life.¹⁵ It is incarnational and liberating – which brings us to the last argument in Carro's paper (pp.23-24).

Witnessing Presence: A Prospect

During the 'golden age'¹⁶ of Russian Orthodox cross-cultural mission in the second half of the 19th century, the famous director of the Russian Orthodox Theological Academy in Kazan (whose centre of missionary training opened in 1854) and a preacher among the Tartars, Nikolai Ilminskii (d. 1891), shared a profound missiological insight:

We believe that the evangelical word of our Saviour Jesus Christ, having become incarnate in the living tongue of the Tartars, and through it having associated itself most sincerely with their deepest thoughts and religious consciousness would produce the Christian revival of this tribe.¹⁷

As John Binns observes:

This model of incarnation describes the style of the Russian missions, and of the missionary method of the Orthodox churches, which set out to root the Christian church within the culture concerned, rather than — as has happened in some other examples of missionary work — supplying a complete cultural package of which the Christian message is simply the spiritual component.¹⁸

At the International Baptist Theological Seminary (Prague, Czech Republic), two of the major programmes of practical studies are Applied Theology and Contextual Missiology. With my colleagues, we are involved in an ongoing discussion around what constitutes a proper believing community. Where is the emphasis? Is it on worship and discipleship (the

¹³ On the three-fold transforming mission of a believing community, see Stassen, Yeager and Yoder, *Authentic Transformation*, pp. 222-246.

¹⁴ For a different (in its practises, yet compatible in intent) understanding of holism in mission, see Thomas H. McAlpine, *By Word, Work, and Wonder: Cases in Holistic Mission* (Monrovia: MARC, 1995), p. 2 and *passim*; A. H. Mathias Zahnister, *Symbol and Ceremony: Making Disciples Across Cultures* (Monrovia: MARC, 1997), pp. 183-210.

¹⁵ On the practises of witness of the radical Christian communities, see John Howard Yoder, *The Fullness of Christ: Paul's Revolutionary Vision of Universal Ministry* (Elgin: Brethren Press, 1987), *passim*. McClendon, *Witness* 2000, pp. 378-83.

¹⁶ I am indebted to John Binns for the term and the example. See his *An Introduction to the Christian Orthodox Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 153.

¹⁷ Qtd. in George Florovsky, 'Russian missions, a historical sketch', in his *Aspects of Church History* (Belmont, 1987), 154, *via* Binns, *An Introduction*, 2002, p. 156.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

inward aspect of mission) or is it on evangelism and outreach (the outward manifestations of mission)? In line with the previous discussions, a holistic ecclesial understanding will keep both in balance.¹⁹ Is it not time to give up on the Enlightenment division of atomistic self-sufficient disciplines and look at a holistic, integral model for the Church's life? Sound discipleship is the ground for sound witness, and sound witness calls for committed discipleship.

Is our discussion thus far a realistic paradigm to respond to current challenges to Christian mission? Will it work only in the west, or is it also relevant for cultures which differ significantly from the largely christianised European and American contexts?²⁰ Or is it just a wishful theological construct? To back up my claim for the practicality of genuine Christian witness, I want to share two short stories which illustrate the impact of Christian presence with integrity.

Last year I met a young man enquiring about studying at IBTS. Though obviously intelligent and able, he impressed me more with his authentic sense of Christian calling. Aided by friends from the Baptist Union of which he is a member, I have learned that he is the son of one of Lithuania's current prominent politicians. He and his wife were gifted dramatic actors, nominally Catholic and happily married with three children. They were living a bohemian lifestyle in the capital of the country. After a dramatic conversion experience, they followed their understanding of Christ's co-missioning call and moved to one of the toughest and religiously-nationalistic areas of the country in order to witness to their newly-acquired faith, by simply being present and living as they believed they should. They became a catalyst for the small community which emerged and might soon be constituted as a Baptist church in the area. He is looking for further theological education, not to excel academically or to progress in his pastoral career, but because he feels the need of it in order to be a more adequate witness in the intellectually-sophisticated, secularised culture of his town.²¹

¹⁹ Drawing on the experience of Orthodox communities, Romanian theologian Ion Bria comes to the same conclusion in his insightful reflections on the challenges to the ecumenical dialogue collected in *The Liturgy after the Liturgy: Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), *passim*.

²⁰ The need for re-assessment of the essence of the Church's missionary witness is all the more important in this time of global pluralistic religious encounters and the explosive expansion of Christianity southward into the less-chartered territories of new conceptualisations. The discernment of genuine Christian identity (and related paradigm of mission) is particularly significant for current global political realities, as religious identification begins to take precedence over allegiance to secular nation-state or ethnic origin. For a fresh and provocative study of the changing face of global Christianity, see e.g. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

²¹ I am indebted to Linas Andronovas for the details of this story.

One IBTS student recently reflected on a situation in his home country of Albania. In the early 1990s, a young Christian couple from rural Romania sensed a call for mission in Albania. Upon arrival, they settled in a small Muslim village in the mountains and learned Albanian. In part, because they were dependent largely on their own resources, they decided to integrate fully into the form of life of the Albanian villagers, making a living, as with the locals, by farming. They did not press their faith on the villagers, but lived day-by-day and side-by-side with them, simply being genuinely who they are – committed Christians. In the late 1990s, a group of fundamentalist Muslim missionaries came to the village and urged the locals to get rid of the Christian infidels, in exchange for substantial financial support for the village. The village unanimously forced the Islamic fundamentalists to leave. The missionaries and the Christian witness are still there.²²

Conclusion

In concluding my reflections on Dr Daniel Carro's paper, I want to return to the theme of his presentation. What are the challenges to the Christian mission today? In light of the discussion outlined above, my understanding is that the true challenge to the mission of the Christian community today is the very same challenge that faced the earliest disciples of the Lord: to be present – personally and as a community of the followers of the way of Jesus Christ – as an authentic witness for the Kingdom of God, propagating the good news about it in a world of despair. Thus, it is clear that mission is not an option for the Church. It is an imperative. Mission is about transforming hearts and minds inside and outside the Church. Jesus' instruction to his disciples in the 1st century applies equally to his disciples today: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Mt 24:14, RSV). We still have a lot of work to do.

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²² I express gratitude to Alfred Gollosi for this story.

Discerning and Following God's Mission

Introduction

The invitation to respond to Daniel Carro's presentation, 'Challenges to the Christian Mission Today', as well as my colleague, Dr Parush Parushev's, response to it in 'Presence and Witness: Facing the Challenges to Christian Mission Today', gives me the opportunity to engage in a discussion with both of them. But the challenge for me, following upon these two excellent pieces, is to contribute something further to the discussion. Moreover, given the long history of scholarship and debates on these subjects – especially since the last half of the 20th century – one could think that everything has already been said so that one might only repeat what has been previously discussed. But if everything to say has already been said, and it is perfect, why are there still different views on what mission is and what mission should be?

The dilemma begins with the term 'mission' itself. It appeared in Christian vocabulary only in the second half of the second millennium, in reference to those 'followers of Christ' who disseminated Christianity alongside colonialists as they conquered the world. But it is clear that these followed a Christ that was very different from the one in the Scriptures; for them, he was the Lord of power, abuse, force, victory, as illustrated in Carro's story of the Athahualpa people and the Spanish mission. The abuse and bloodshed associated with this word extends even into the global world of the 21st century, where 'Christian' soldiers on a mission for 'Christian' freedom bomb other humans while missionaries follow up with aggressive preaching of an 'uncompromising gospel'.¹

In light of these abuses and distortions, should we abandon the term 'mission' altogether as it stands alongside a word with similarly tragic connotations: 'crusade'? But, if so, what substitute can we find? Is there a word that would encompass the whole range of positive meanings of this word? Or do we need to redeem the word?² But, as in the similar case of 'crusade' in a Muslim context, how could this be done?

As it is not possible to discuss this issue in sufficient depth in the limits of a response article, I would prefer to leave these questions for another time and instead emphasise here a few aspects of the term and how it relates to God and his Church.

¹ David van Biema, "Missionaries under cover – growing numbers of Evangelicals are trying to spread Christianity in Muslim lands. But is this what the world needs now?" *Time*, August 4, 2003: pp. 34-41.

² As discussed during the Leunberger Mission Group meetings (Prague, September 26-30, 2003).

Missio Dei

Although actually coined much earlier,³ the term *missio Dei* came to prominence after its usage at the Willingen Conference of the IMC in 1952, when theologians and missiologists took hold of the insight that “God [is] a missionary God”,⁴ the one who was in mission even when he created the world and in whose mission the Church participates. In its classical definition, *missio Dei* means that God the Father has sent his Son, that the Father and the Son have sent the Holy Spirit, and that the Triune one sends his Church in his mission into the world.⁵ This basic definition has been expanded and used in many different ways,⁶ undergoing further development in the Eastern Orthodox tradition as well as in the Vatican II documents, specifically in *Gaudium es Spes*.

Fifty years after that decisive Willingen Conference in 1952, it seems that the term was buried at the same conference with the words that the concept really was just an excuse for the Church's passivity.⁷ But it appears that those who previously criticised the formula have now rediscovered the term for themselves. It seems that the term challenges their pragmatic activism, strategy and planning, questions the understanding that what they are doing is their own mission and forces them to recognise that they are merely partakers in *God's* mission, which goes beyond the *missiones ecclesiae*. As Neill writes, “The age of missions [in the plural constituting the derivative] is at an end”;⁸ the age of mission [God's mission], if I may correct Neill's statement a bit, continues. The Church's responsibility is to discern and follow God's mission by displaying the same attribute as God has, i.e., by being a missional Church. This shifts the focus from the Church to God and makes the Church a servant, not the activist or conqueror in her own right. But this means also, as Carro asserts, that the Church is “Our first mission field” (p.22). And so the use of *missio Dei* in Carro's article leans more toward this rediscovered evangelical meaning, joining but at the same time expanding the original

³ Karl Barth had already used the term at the Brandenburg Missionary Conference in 1932, as did Karl Hartenstein in 1933.

⁴ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), p. 390.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Moltmann, for instance, picks up on this formulation that “[i]t is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church”. Moltmann (1977:64), quoted from Bosch.

⁷ Further information is in ‘50th anniversary of the World Mission Conference: Mission Festival and Congress’, August 16-21, 2002, Willingen, Congress ‘Missio Dei’ God's Mission Today: Summary and Conclusions (Reflector's report) on <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/mission/willingen.html>. Compare also with Thorwald Lorenzen, ‘Baptists and a Theology of Mission - Summit on Baptist Mission for the 21st Century’, Swanwick, England, May 5-9, 2003, p. 4: “As long as God is God the *missio Dei* cannot be stopped.”

⁸ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 572.

WCC definition of Willingen, thus offering a helpful correction of current definitions and practises of the Church and missionaries in mission.

Missional Bible Study

Another topic in Carro's article deals with the Bible in mission. Many, even in the Church, have not heard God's voice through this 'speaking book'. I do not here refer to today's secularised population, nor am I accusing the so-called liberals, as some conservatives do. I am speaking about those who pretend to hear and to respond, but whose actions often do not comply with what the biblical text calls for and whose mission is more often like Valverde's than Christ's. Repeated attempts to underline the Bible's truth with terms such as 'inerrant' and to find evidence for it through archaeology, history and tradition will not help to prove the book to be the word of God. This book speaks only when people will listen and live according to it and to the one whom they claim to be its author.

The missional Church should read and study the Bible and, more specifically, in the Hebraic way, where reading and understanding means doing and following God's way. The following are five hermeneutical questions for those seeking to do missional Bible study, to discern the speaking:⁹

- Mission – How does this text send us and equip our witness?
- Context – How does this text read us and our world?
- Gospel – How does this text evangelise us with good news?
- Change – How does this text convert us in personal and corporate life?
- Future – How does this text orient us to the coming reign of God?

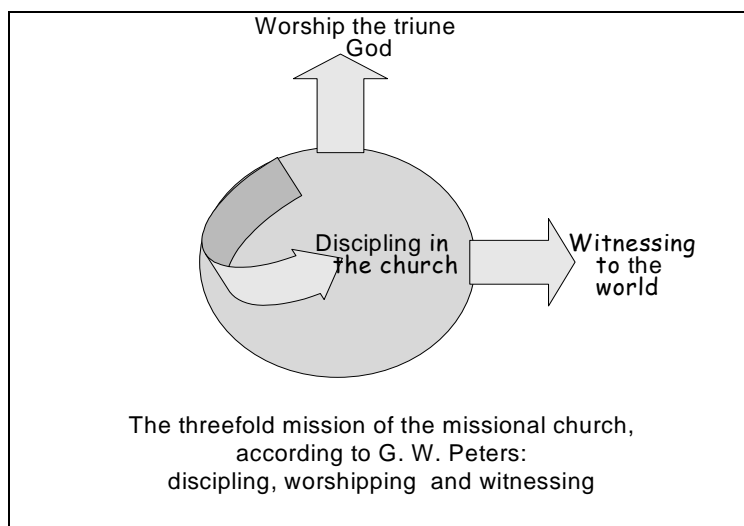
By such a reading and doing of the text, disciples of Christ will be so moulded in and for mission and witness by their lives that the Bible will indeed be the powerful word of the living, triune God.

The missional Church – the whole Church in mission – has a triune mission, which is not limited to soul winning, as it is still sometimes understood. The missional Church must:

1. carry the whole Gospel to the broken world;
2. go the way of the Radical Reformation and disciple those who respond to the Gospel to become Christ's disciples; and
3. humbly fulfil the mission that all creation is already doing, that is, worship the Triune in words and deeds. It is through this triune

⁹ Presented at the WCC Breklum Consultation (June 2002) by Wilbert R. Shenk; see also *International Review of Mission*, April 2003, Vol. 92, Iss. 365.

mission – the same mission for which Jesus was sent – that the Church participates in the wider mission of God. Peters illustrates it this way:¹⁰



This model reflects the debate of the second half of the 20th century and deals primarily with the third area, with the witness of God's people to the world. Instead of focusing on witness only — as debated in the IMC and Lausanne — Christians are called to follow Christ who modelled the full mission of God.

Contextualisation

'Contextualisation' is a buzz word today. At IBTS, we even carry it in the name of one of our postgraduate programmes: 'Contextual Missiology'. However, my experience in the mission setting of the Commonwealth of Independent States has been that so-called missionaries, though trained in cultural anthropology and many other disciplines of today's mission studies, never fully adopt the culture and context as their own. If, for instance, we define the missionary and his/her culture and context with the letter 'A' and the culture and context she/he enters with the letter 'B', the normal result of a good integration is 'A + B = AB'. The closest a missionary can get is 'aB', but too often it is more like 'Ab'. This demonstrates that as soon as possible a continuing mission needs to be taken over by those who belong to the culture.

But at the same time we must be realistic about what happens when nationals who take over the ministry of a foreign missionary have been trained in that same mission context. They will also only start with 'aB' at

¹⁰ G. W. Peters, Lecture notes in 'Theology of mission', MBBS, California, Autumn 1988.

the most, as she/he has watched the missionaries and has accepted their ways. Before the full Gospel message really becomes an indigenous 'B' and contextually relevant, it may take at least one or even two generations.

However, there is one more problem that has sometimes been overlooked by those enchanted by the notion of 'contextualisation', in which context becomes dominant and the Gospel has to submit to the local context.¹¹ We could draw a similar analogy, calling contextualisation 'C' and Gospel 'G', yielding the expected combination: 'C + G = CG'. Instead, we often have a 'Cg', where the Gospel message is overpowered by contextual factors and loses its substance. Quite often this happens when missionaries from Western cultures move into the so-called 'mission field', often bringing a Gospel packaged in Western culture. In reaction, today's local theologies argue for some necessary syncretism and distinction. Indeed, there is a need to express the Gospel in ways that communicate within a local culture; but the danger is that, in the same way as Western culture was misunderstood as Gospel, local contextualised gospels may, under the influence of their cultures, also lose the Gospel's substance and original meaning. This calls for a dialogue between different local interpretations of the Gospel in order to arrive at a better definition of the Gospel in various local contexts as well as in the global context.

Power or Liberation

It was Luther who discovered anew the liberating God of mercy and grace and who, to underline this experience, changed his name from Luder to Luther, alluding to the Greek *eleuterious* – the liberated person. But the liberation had its limits even for Luther, as reflected in his debate with Erasmus in 'Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen'. In this, he followed Paul's idea that liberation is only one part of the Gospel: One is liberated for God's service, freely choosing to become God's slave instead of a slave to evil powers. It also includes liberation for the other, freedom to give oneself for and to the community, to take responsibility and lay aside individualistic ways by becoming part of the community of disciples, being a servant to all. That Daniel Carro probably holds a similar view is reflected in his remarks about the use of the two terms 'power' and 'liberation', relating these to how the Church should pass on the Gospel, ie., not as a powerful but as a liberating Church.

¹¹ More on this topic is in 'Part 3: Cultural Differences and the Message', in Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), pp. 141-224.

The Church liberates not by its own power, but by God's power, a power which should not be neglected, belittled or rejected.¹² Today's Church *needs* this power to bring dignity to humanity and to all creation, as his servant, engaging with the non-Christian world from a minority perspective. I would suggest that instead of the two terms, 'liberation and power', the Church should use a term that witnesses to the motives of Christ and should be ours as well: compassion. Luther looked for this grace, mercy, and love;¹³ and this is what the world needs today – people desperately need to experience this compassion and belonging. Our mission should reflect God's way of mission in this world, our discerning and following the missionary God, and liberating all for the reign of God.

Conclusion

There is much more to the discussion on mission. Many excellent questions have been raised by Daniel Carro in his article for all who search for answers in this diverse world in order to be able to respond to the rapidly-changing context, both local and global. To follow God's mission, his people need to be persistent in a radical balance, discerning, but then continuing the *missio Dei*.

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¹² When discussing power, it is often helpful to take a closer look especially at what our colleagues from Pentecostal or Charismatic churches can teach us. They often have a positive view on the power that our churches need. Petrus J. Gräbe provides a biblical perspective on power in his book *The Power of God in Paul's Letters*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

¹³ Luther's call for a merciful God can be answered in this compassionate Christ. Today's question for those searching for meaning in life may then be more radical and more elementary: Where are you God? The compassionate Christ responds to this question and offers to us to experience himself. See Walter Lüssi, 'Kontextualisierung der Rechtfertigungsbotschaft in der evangelistischen Verkündigung - Anfragen, Zugänge, Impulse', unpublished discussion paper, May 2003, presented at the Lehrgesprächsgruppe 'Das evangelische Profil im missionarischen Auftrag der Kirchen in Europa' of the Leuenberger Kirchengemeinschaft, September 2003.

A Critical Evaluation of Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Mission in the Light of Western Pluralism

“The future is not what it used to be!” shouted a Czech rock singer in 1990.¹ Though this singer was reflecting a common sentiment among Czechs as the Velvet Revolution signalled an end to communist rule, he was inadvertently describing a dilemma that has perplexed the Christian Church in Western Europe for many decades, namely, “Christendom in Europe is dead”, to quote Dan Beeby. In many ways we acknowledge this in our minds, but we continue to live as if we do not want to believe it to be true.² “We are now pagan,” Beeby continues, “the most difficult kind of paganism because it is inoculated against the gospel”.³ Indeed, it is hard for us to imagine the Western world as a mission field, let alone as the most difficult one.⁴

When Lesslie Newbigin returned to Britain from serving as a missionary to India, he found a church reluctant and unable, visibly, to embody the truth of the gospel. In Newbigin's view, this lack of confidence in the gospel was due to “the enthronement of reason in the modern scientific worldview”.⁵ As the Church has relaxed into this worldview, it has lost its identity as a missionary community. Thus, Newbigin embarked on a quest to bring into Christian circles a new dialogue relating to gospel and culture in light of this new reality. Yet, some view his approach as being too anti-cultural or counter-cultural,⁶ while others view him as being too “liberal, in their opinion, holding too inclusivistic a view of revelation and salvation with respect to the non-Christian religious world”.⁷

In this essay, I will seek to demonstrate that Newbigin's theology of mission – as it centres on the Spirit-guided act of witnessing to the truth of the human story, disclosed by God to a chosen community through the risen Christ – forges a mission strategy for the Church that steers clear of

¹ Juraj Kusnierik, ‘Struggling with the Past: Evangelicals in Postcommunist The Western world’, found at <http://www.care.org.uk/resource/Is/Is961203.htm>, accessed March 03, 2003.

² Dan Beeby, ‘Christendom in The Western World is Dead’, *Council for World Mission*, found at <http://www.cwmission.org.uk/features/default.cfm?FeatureID=282>, accessed March 03, 2003.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Much of what we call ‘Western’ culture is now representative of urban centres in Eastern Europe as well; thus, its usage here may extend beyond what we normally understand as the ‘West’.

⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Autobiography* (Eerdmans, 1985; updated version, St Andrew's Press, 1993), p. 230.

⁶ See Michael W. Goheen, ‘Is Lesslie Newbigin's Model of Contextualization Anticultural?’, *Mission Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2-38, 2002., p. 136.

⁷ Nathan Hobby, ‘Pinnock and the Pope: An Evangelical – Roman Catholic Inclusivism’, found April 10th, 2003 at: <http://www.geocities.com/savageparade/UNEVAN.htm>.

both 'liberal' and 'conservative' Christian mission efforts. I will map out his approach and point out aspects which shed new light on the difficulties innate in a pluralist context, though his theology of mission has far broader implications. First, I will outline current discussions among Christian scholars (including Newbigin) concerning the context. Second, I will make an exposition of three main discussions that highlight important themes of Newbigin's theology of mission: *freedom and relatedness*; *the clue to world history*; and *clash of ultimate faith commitments*. Third, I will expand the discussion to include Newbigin's critics and their various challenges to his theology and perspective. Finally, I will briefly summarise the implications of Newbigin's contribution to the Church's understanding of the mission, closing with a challenging conclusion.

Context – The heretical imperative

In *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*, Newbigin describes the pluralistic context within which the Church lives in terms of the title of Peter Berger's work: *The Heretical Imperative*: "With respect to ultimate beliefs, pluralism rules, and thus each individual has to make a personal decision about ultimate questions. In that sense we are all now subject to the 'heretical imperative'."⁸ Many others agree with Newbigin's evaluation of the context. J. Campbell writes that "[t]he fall of modernity and the rise of something else are being felt on every continent. Modern culture is in crisis. The Church is in crisis. Having been shaped in and by modernity, the Church has been marginalized by modern culture, and now further marginalized by postmodernity."⁹ Wilbert Shenk, who believes the Western Church is the 'Christendom church', highlights the loss of the Church's credibility; [it is] a church "without a clear sense of mission in relation to its culture. But a church without mission is an anomaly, a caricature of what it was intended to be".¹⁰

Craig Van Gelder thoroughly evaluates the context within which the Church lives today, especially in light of the fact that "the scope of the change in the present shift is calling for some fundamental rethinking of how we understand both the gospel and the church".¹¹ Johann Baptist Metz

⁸ The title of a work of Peter Berger, quoted in Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 11.

⁹ J. Campbell, 'Postmodernism: Ripe for a Global Harvest – But is the Church Ready?', in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (1999): Vol. 35, No. 4, cited by René Erwich, in 'Identity and Mission', in *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, Vol. two, No. 2, January 2002, pp. 30-31.

¹⁰ Wilbert R. Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), p. 118.

¹¹ Craig Van Gelder, 'Postmodernism and Evangelicals: A Unique Missiological Challenge at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century', from *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXX, No. 4, October 2002, p. 492. In Van Gelder's thesis he makes it a point to distinguish postmodernity from hypermodernity, as well as to divide postmodernity into four sub-categories: *negative theoretical*

asks, “Given the undeniable diversity of cultural and religious worlds, is there still a universally binding and thus plausible criterion for understanding? Or is everything now at the whim of the ‘post-modern’ market?”¹² Van Gelder is confident that this postmodern, pluralistic context is a reality that must be acknowledged and faced:

It appears that postmodernism increasingly represents the cultural air that we breathe. The challenges before the church are becoming clearer. It will either learn to contextualize the gospel and church into this new cultural setting, or it will find itself increasingly marginalized and irrelevant to the next generation.¹³

Postmodernity

Postmodernity, as described by J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, involves a great scepticism about the central role assigned to reason and rational thought since the Enlightenment.¹⁴ Newbigin focuses on the epistemological aspects of Enlightenment and the subsequent shifts of this epistemological framework within postmodernity. Postmodernity, in his view, is the cultural manifestation of the radical pluralism of truth claims and atomisation of the individual.¹⁵ Rolf Hille describes this as “the dance around the golden calf of self... man in his ‘I’ loneliness proves to be overburdened with the task of self-establishment and self-design, and enters the crisis of meaning found in nihilism and existentialism”.¹⁶ Newbigin expresses a similar perspective: “If one looks at the characteristics of contemporary European society in the areas of literature, drama, art, and music, the picture is one of nihilism.”¹⁷ Elsewhere, he

postmodernity; negative popular culture postmodernity; positive theoretical postmodernity; and positive popular culture postmodernity. He sees it important to address each reality as a specific context. He also distinguishes *modernism* from *modernity*.

¹² Johann Baptist Metz, ‘In the Pluralism of Religious and Cultural Worlds: Notes Toward a Theological and Political Program’, translated by John Downey and Heiko Wiggers, *Cross Currents*, Vol. 49, No. 2, Summer 1999, p. 228.

¹³ Van Gelder, p. 492.

¹⁴ J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 187, cited in J. Andrew Kirk, ‘Following Modernity and Postmodernity: A Missiological Investigation’, *Mission Studies*, Vol. XVI, 1-2, 2000, p. 225. Kirk writes that in the postmodern view “the history of humankind is judged to be a discontinuous succession of fairly random events without any transcendent meaning or purpose”. Kirk, p. 225.

¹⁵ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁶ Rolf Hille, “Transition from Modernity to Post-Modernity: A Theological Evaluation”, *European Journal of Theology* (2002) 11:2, p. 91.

¹⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press Intl., 1996), p. 9. This view is echoed by Van Gelder, who points out the culture’s nihilistic relativism of “all of life’s constructed meanings”, a view accentuated in escalating teen suicides, and an expanding drug culture, and reflected in many recent works put out by the film industry. Van Gelder, p. 495

contends that Western Christianity is now “an advanced case of syncretism”.¹⁸

J. Andrew Kirk is convinced that for the Church to advance it must “live after modernity and post-modernity”. When the Church is finding its centre in God’s self-revelation, it is this very touch-stone, a new paradigmatic reality that transcends culture and its various developments, that allows the Christian movement to not only survive, but to transform culture. *Revelation*, therefore, is an “indispensable necessity” for the Church as it concerns itself to avoid ontological and ethical nihilism. It is also a foundation upon which the Church can finally assert itself and find coherence.¹⁹ Indeed, the Western Church has, for a long time, learned, in Michael Goheen’s words: “to peacefully co-exist with post-Enlightenment culture”, a result being its difficulty to recover its missionary purpose as it encounters culture. As it has uncritically accepted the foundational faith commitments of its culture, the Church has been “absorbed without posing any kind of radical challenge to those assumptions”.²⁰

1 – Newbigin’s Theology of Mission

Freedom and relatedness

“Nostalgia for Christendom is very understandable but it is futile.”²¹ In Newbigin’s view, one of the core problems is the Church’s understanding of freedom as it relates to the state and society. He believes that “...for the church simply to be free to do its own thing is not freedom”.²² He delves deeper into the discussion on the issue of the Church’s freedom, using as an illustration the relationship between the Confessing Church in Germany and the American and British Churches during the 1930s and 40s:

[T]he good liberal Christians in the Anglo-Saxon world who supported the Confessing Church, supported it for reasons which that Church was bound to reject... The Anglo-Saxon saw it as the absence of limitation: the Church was not controlled by the state. To Bonhoeffer and his colleagues that was no freedom at all. The

¹⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (Geneva: WCC, 1983), p. 23.

¹⁹ J. Andrew Kirk, ‘Following Modernity and Postmodernity: A Missiological Investigation’ in *Mission Studies*, Vol. XVI, 1-2, 2000, pp. 229-232.

²⁰ Goheen, a Newbigin scholar, reflects much of Newbigin’s view shaped by Polanyi and Peter Berger: “The barred cage that forms the prison for the gospel in contemporary Western culture is the syncretistic accommodation of the gospel to the fact-value dichotomy. The liberation of the gospel can only occur as the church’s embodiment of the gospel is released from the idolatry of the reigning public doctrine of modern culture.” Michael W. Goheen, ‘Liberating the Gospel from its Modern Cage: An Interpretation of Lesslie Newbigin’s Gospel and Modern Culture Project’ in *Missionalia*, 30:3 (November 2002), p. 362.

²¹ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 68.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

freedom of the Church is that which it has when it is obedient to the word of God, the freedom which the Church has even when its preachers are put in Prison.²³

Newbigin is emphatic about referring to mission as “not ours but God’s”.²⁴ A church’s freedom is proper only if, without exception, it is inseparable from its obligation to proclaim the sovereignty of Christ over every aspect of human life:²⁵

The individualistic model of freedom which pervades our society and controls the way we approach every question has to be challenged by the gospel affirmation that we are not naturally free but that we may receive the gift of freedom when we are in Christ, and that in every area of life there is only one Lord to be obeyed, namely the Lord Jesus Christ.²⁶

The individual’s freedom to do as she or he wishes becomes an idolatrous ideology of freedom. As Trinitarian faith sees all reality in terms of relatedness, it recognises, unmasks, and rejects the ideology of freedom. As this ideology places the autonomous self at the very centre and sees other selves as limitations on its freedom, it rejects relatedness and community, and hence rejects the Trinitarian faith.²⁷ In Newbigin’s view, the best example of this ‘ideology of freedom’ is found in the contemporary ideology of the free market. In the free market, human beings are supposed to be motivated solely by self-interest. The basic component of society is the individual, who, with single-minded purpose, seeks the maximum profit through a minimum of effort.²⁸

The idea that if economic life is detached from all moral considerations and left to operate by its own laws all will be well is simply an abdication of human responsibility. It is the handing over of human life to the pagan goddess of fortune. If Christ’s sovereignty is not recognized in the world of economics, then demonic powers take control.²⁹

Newbigin stresses the importance of adopting the biblical view of human life as relational. Mutual relatedness, this inter-dependence of one

²³ Ibid., *Truth to Tell*, p. 71.

²⁴ Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 64.

²⁵ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, pp. 71-2.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 72.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 75-6.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 77. Indeed, Newbigin sees that, as this economic system becomes absolute, functioning free of rational control and in the light of ethical principles, it turns into a power that enslaves human beings. He writes, “At an early stage in the evolution of free market capitalism it became obvious that it was producing the abominations of child labor and the destruction of human health and dignity”.

²⁹ Ibid.

on another, is not only a part of the process or journey towards salvation, “but is intrinsic to the goal itself”.³⁰ Our knowledge of and relationship with God is “dependent on the one whom he gives us to be the bearer of this relation, not just as one who proclaims and nurtures us on the way but as the partner in the end”.³¹ In essence, Newbigin is saying there can be no private salvation, “no salvation which does not involve us with one another”.³² With this, Newbigin ushers us into a deeper discussion on the doctrine of election with regard to the history of the world.

The clue to world history

Stemming as much from his biblical understanding as from his life experiences, Newbigin relates the significant advances in his own mission work to what he calls the “Peter and Cornelius Paradigm”. These advances come in ways of which one has no advance knowledge; it is by God’s own initiative that the hearts of people are opened to the gospel.³³

The messenger (the ‘angel’ of Acts 10:3) may be a stranger, a preacher, a piece of Scripture, a dream, an answered prayer, or a deep experience of joy or sorrow, of danger or deliverance. It was not part of any missionary ‘strategy’ devised by the church. It was the free and sovereign deed of God, who goes before his church. And, like Peter, the church can usually find good reasons for being unwilling to follow. But follow it must if it is to be faithful. For the mission is not ours but God’s.³⁴

The coming of Jesus introduced into human history an event in which the reign of God is revealed in the form of weakness and foolishness to a people God has chosen as bearers of the revelation, and it has been made known to them so that they in turn would proclaim it to all. It is the reign of God that is being proclaimed, the “secret of universal and cosmic history”.³⁵ This proclamation begins with the creation of the world, has as its centre and turning point the death and resurrection of him who is the Word of God – through whom all things came to be and are – and looks toward a consummation that is “beyond history and yet gathers up all that has been wrought through history”.³⁶ The human being is a body-soul unity, whose personal history cannot be severed from the history of the

³⁰ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 82.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, p. 64.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁶ Newbigin, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew’s Press, 1994), p. 110.

world. The whole of history, and not merely the history of each individual, moves and culminates in relationship with Christ. Newbigin writes:

Our individual lives are not separate solo items each of which is to receive its praise or its blame off-stage afterwards. We are part of the whole, and the end to which Christ teaches us to look is not our own private and personal bliss but the victory of his love over the whole creation. And meanwhile, the task given to us is to be his witnesses. The central clue to world history is the Christian world mission.³⁷

Christian mission, in Newbigin's view, is the clue to world history, in the sense that it is the reference point to which all of history's meaning is related and understood. Ultimately, human response, or lack of response, to this reference point would be of eternal consequence. Newbigin ultimately places meaning itself, and the understanding of meaning – or epistemology – within this understanding. Christians therefore do not live and act in and through history as the 'master race'; but instead they go through history as servant people, looking to the Father "who is alone the Lord of history".³⁸ Christians accept God's disposition of events as the context of their obedience, always reliant on his Spirit as guide. Newbigin writes, "They go through history as the witness people, in whom the Spirit is present to bear witness of the real meaning of the things which happen in the world, so that – *in relation to these things* – men are compelled to make decisions for or against God".³⁹

Election and the clash in ultimate faith-commitment

The Christian believer, as she/he is incorporated into God's mission to the world, is now free in Christ and joins the ranks of the bearers of the Kingdom proclamation. These 'bearers', the "ecumenical fellowship representing the witness of Christians from other cultures", together with the Holy Scriptures, and the local culture to which the fellowship is engaged in mission interact continually – developing a relationship which has at its centre of focus the person of Jesus Christ. Newbigin's triangular field, describing the three fundamental points of interaction as God's mission unfolds in history, finds little dissonance with the postmodern culture at two of its points. The ecumenical fellowship and the point of interaction with local culture are both non-threatening to a pluralistic world, because openness and dialogue are intrinsic to both. The point at which there is contention, however, is in regard to the aspect of revelation

³⁷ Newbigin, *A Faith for This One World?*, p. 105.

³⁸ Newbigin, *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1963), p. 37.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-8.

through the Holy Scripture as an “independent party in this development”. The notion that the biblical narrative ought to have authority over other particular cultures is exactly this point which contemporary Western culture finds impossible to believe and offensive.⁴⁰ At the core of God’s revelation in Scripture lies the dogma which is central to Christian tradition, namely that God chose one people among all the people to be the “unique bearer of his saving purposes for all nations”.⁴¹ Contemporary Western culture says it is impossible to believe that one among all the cultures should have such a unique position. This notion is allegedly ‘impossible’ because in play is another dogma, which denies absolute particularity regarding revelation, namely the postmodern explanation of human experience:

Here two different dogmatic systems confront one another, and I know of no set of axioms more fundamental than either of them, on the basis of which it would be possible to demonstrate the truth of one of these dogmas and the falsity of the other. According to one dogma, world history is in some sense a coherent whole, and it is therefore possible to affirm that certain events have a unique significance for the entire story. According to the other dogma, there are no events that have a unique significance and therefore no universally valid affirmation can be made about the meaning of history as a whole.⁴²

As Christians affirm the unique significance of these events they are affirming Christ’s lordship in history and therefore making a dogmatic statement as part of their faith-commitment to Jesus as Lord. Newbigin leaves little room for the possibility that revelation could come from outside the sphere of God’s fellowship of witnesses, as these are the sole and unique ‘bearers’ of the ‘open secret’.⁴³

The freedom of the Church has less to do with political freedom and more to do with the kind of consciousness that is developed by the convictional community as it collectively centres itself in the mind of Christ. The freedom comes as it begins to more fully comprehend God’s comprehensive Lordship in human life, history, purpose, and responsibility. God has disclosed his purpose for the world to his Church – allowing this unique community to participate in a story unlike any other, in which a lost world is ushered into a redemption sufficiently ample for all.

⁴⁰ Hunsberger, p. 78.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, p. 154.

⁴³ The title: ‘Open Secret’ reveals Newbigin’s persistent exposition on the inter-balance between the ‘universality’ of God’s intentions for humanity and the ‘particularity’ in God’s choosing or electing of his witnesses – bearing his revelation to the rest of the world.

Yet, many missiologists and theologians have criticised Newbigin regarding his treatment of culture, the idea of 'Christendom', the seemingly incomplete nature of his thesis on salvation history with regard to Israel's ultimate purpose, and his overall view regarding recent developments in the Christian ecumenical movement. In this next section we will discuss these issues.

2 – Challenging Newbigin

One thing we can be sure of, writes René Erwich, "[T]he church. . . finds herself in a crisis-encounter with culture, whether this is interpreted in a negative or positive way".⁴⁴ If one were to summarise Newbigin's writings on this issue, one might find less of a battle-like description; yet Elaine Graham and Heather Walton, critiquing Newbigin regarding 'The Gospel and Our Culture' movement in Britain, remark that it "might more adequately be described as the 'Gospel Against Our Culture' movement".⁴⁵ Stephen Bevans interprets Newbigin as 'counter-cultural', in that "culture is regarded with utmost suspicion utterly corrupt and resistant to the gospel".⁴⁶ Michael Goheen, defending Newbigin's position, writes:

[A]n implicit understanding of creation and humanity's role in its development underlies so much of his writing that Newbigin cannot be read as one who entertains *only* a deep suspicion of culture; nor is culture completely resistant to the gospel... Newbigin is essentially concerned for transformation; to expose the foundational cultural assumptions and, in doing so, 'reasserting the comprehensive scope of the gospel's authority'.⁴⁷

Taking Newbigin's experience in India, religiously pluralistic in the extreme, as a reference point for understanding the way he develops his thinking and understanding, it is not surprising that he has developed a comprehensive thesis upon which reason, religion, and culture can be measured. In like manner, one must not be surprised when Newbigin begins to measure the effectiveness of the Church's awareness of the task at hand, given his penchant for not leaving a stone unturned, especially if it concerns the Christian Church. As a whole, theologians are in agreement that there must be reform for there to be effective mission. Newbigin's juxtaposition of Christ's love for the world and Christ's intentions for his Church in representing another reality (the presence of the Kingdom of

⁴⁴ Erwich, p. 31.

⁴⁵ Goheen, "Is Lesslie Newbigin's Model of Contextualization Anticultural?", p. 136.

⁴⁶ Stephen Bevans, *Doing Theology in North America: A Counter-Cultural Model?* Unpublished seminar paper given at 'Gospel and our Culture Network Conference', Chicago, 1993. Quoted in Goheen, "Is Lesslie Newbigin's Model of Contextualization Anticultural?", p. 137.

⁴⁷ Goheen, pp, 138, 139, 374.

God) is not so much contradictory as it is a challenge to the Church. It is as a tightrope balancing act that the Church must engage in to be effective in its witness.

Election

George Hunsberger emphasises Newbigin's persistent use of the doctrine of election as it relates to the issue of world history and missions:

[T]he gospel gives meaning to world history ... now placed at the climactic center of Newbigin's mission theology. While it was not always articulated in such a direct manner, his mission theology has come to be founded explicitly on 'election' as both the 'inner logic' of a Trinitarian basis for mission and the 'answer' to the scandal of particularity.⁴⁸

Newbigin joins with Barth and others in seeking to "shift interest in election in the Reformed tradition away from questions of 'why me?' and personal privilege to those of corporate purpose and responsibility".⁴⁹ In George Hunsberger's view, Newbigin's notion of election is distinctively biblical and missionary in character. Newbigin does not draw from the "dogmatic formulation regarding the decrees of God and the status of the believer";⁵⁰ instead he focuses on the declaration of the biblical narrative which has as a core theme the choosing action of God, and in particular, his election of Israel to be his people and of the Church to be his witness.⁵¹ John Roxborough, however, disputes Newbigin's thesis regarding Israel's instrumentality versus its mission:

[W]hy is this not a major element in the prophetic tradition? Is not the story instead a reminder of the importance of other dimensions of the life of faith – worship, morality, internal as well as external justice that carry over into the life of the church? Newbigin... appears to have widened our understanding of the mission of Israel, and narrowed that of the church to those things we call mission.⁵²

Newbigin's understanding of mission begins with the greater biblical themes. In this particular case, and in light of Newbigin's mission-history hermeneutic, the greater biblical theme begins when God takes the initiative in forming a covenant with Israel, and wishes nothing more than to reconcile Israel to himself. The issues Roxborough raises concerning the

⁴⁸ George R. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 114.

⁴⁹ John Roxborough, 'Is 'mission' our only mission? Revisiting the Missionary Nature of the Church', Aotearoa New Zealand Association for Mission Studies Inaugural Conference, Bible College of New Zealand, 27-28 November 2000, 5. Found at: <http://roxborough.com/Articles/Revisiting>.

⁵⁰ Hunsberger, p. 46.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Roxborough, p. 5.

ethics of the Christian community as it seeks to be obedient to the teachings of the Old Testament, i.e., life of faith, worship, morality, etc. would undoubtedly be viewed by Newbigin as essentially those issues that came up during the greater discussion God had with Israel regarding the covenant. Newbigin would further argue that the mission of Israel is yet unfinished. He explains that “. . .to be elect in Christ Jesus, and there is no other election, means to be incorporated into his mission to the world. . .”.⁵³ Israel’s mission is related to the cross through Israel’s remnant, messianic community. Newbigin is persistent in centring God’s mission and purpose for the world in Christ Jesus.

An ecumenical debate

Further criticism of Newbigin’s very Christocentric emphasis has come from the World Council of Churches, most notably from Konrad Raiser. Raiser is critical of Newbigin’s Christocentric emphasis, saying that it “does not allow [Newbigin] to admit either the challenge of religious plurality or the challenges arising from threats to all natural life systems”.⁵⁴ Raiser is concerned to articulate a common mood among member churches within the World Council of Churches, a stance that is termed ‘new ecumenism’. In this view, the Church has a particular responsibility regarding the environment and economics, a responsibility that Raiser claims is not part of, or is not articulated in, Newbigin’s theology. Additionally, Raiser is critical of Newbigin’s “profound reticence regarding interreligious dialogue”, as well as his “attachment to a theology of salvation history”.⁵⁵

Newbigin makes no apologies in his response to Raiser. In his view, the Church must understand that the lordship of Christ extends beyond the Church – Christ is Lord of the economic order as well as the environment. Regarding salvation history, Newbigin emphasises that one reads the mighty acts of God “as part of our real history, secular history, the history of which we are a part. What other history is there?”.⁵⁶

It would seem that Newbigin and Raiser are engaged in a classic ‘conservative’ (evangelical) versus ‘liberal’ (new ecumenism) discussion regarding the Church’s engagement in the world.⁵⁷ Newbigin is not

⁵³ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pp. 86-7.

⁵⁴ Raiser quoted in Peter J. Barret, ‘The Gospel and Western Culture: On the Ideas of Lesslie Newbigin’, *Missionalia*, Vol. 27:1 (April 1999), p. 70.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ One has to recognise that for the Christian ecumenical movement to expand there must necessarily be an open dialogue that, at times, will require yielding and concessions. It would be in Raiser’s interest, as

choosing sides as much as he is concerned to place the supremacy and universality of the cross at the very centre of history, and therefore establishing Christ as the perspective from which all aspects of existence must be oriented. Shenk, reflecting on Newbigin's intentions, believes: "No part of human existence is beyond the scope of God's saving purpose, for the divine compassion encompasses the whole of creation".⁵⁸ Newbigin stands firm in his commitment to challenge the indifference to truth, a re-occurring theme that tends to seep into ecumenical dialogue in phrases such as "struggle for truth", "the sharing of life" and "richness of diversity"⁵⁹ – language reminiscent of contemporary universalism.

Christendom: The debate

Walter Brueggemann believes it is not the business of the Church to reconstruct the world, as this would fall back into the same trap that proved disastrous in ages past; but rather, the task of the Church is to "provide the pieces, materials, and resources out of which a new world can be imagined".⁶⁰ Brueggemann's 'meeting' (a term he uses as he describes the joining of liturgy and proclamation – essentially his concept of the postmodern Christian community) is a "place where people come to receive new materials, or old materials freshly voiced, that will fund, feed, nurture, nourish, legitimate, and authorize a *counterimagination of the world*" (his emphases).⁶¹ "Our responsibility, then," he writes, "is not a grand scheme or a coherent system, but the voicing of a lot of little pieces out of which people can put life together in fresh configurations."⁶² Newbigin's perspective seems to be cut from an entirely different fabric than that of the postmodernist, yet as they both seek to expose the idleness of the Church as often indistinguishable from the culture, Newbigin and Brueggemann are not entirely different in their intent.

Newbigin has, however, been criticised as one advocating for a new Christendom. Though not a primary theme in Newbigin's writings, it is nevertheless present in some of his discussions, an example of which is found in a paper entitled 'Can Modern Society Be Christian?', in which he offers his agenda for the Church's pursuit of this goal. Douglas John Hall,

General Secretary of the WCC, to explore the wider view on theological issues, especially as it affects the co-operative effort that engages the ecumenical movement in mission.

⁵⁸ Wilbert R. Shenk, 'Lesslie Newbigin's Contribution to Mission Theology', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 24, No. 2 April 2000, p. 64.

⁵⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, 'Ecumenical Amnesia', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 18, No. 1, January 1994, pp. 2-5.

⁶⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination: Texts under Negotiation* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1993), p. 20.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

commenting on Newbigin's presentation writes: "... it is wicked to seek a Christian society". In Hall's view, cultural power was one of the problems of Christendom.⁶³ Though not directed at Newbigin (or Hall for that matter), Jacques Ellul makes an interesting statement that reflects a very contrasting view on the subject:

The first error is to think that a state or society can be made Christian. Christianity has always been a personal mutation on the basis of faith in the revelation. It is not a collective thing. There is no plurality except in the church, a specific body that is not a society and even less a power.⁶⁴

Though we may not completely agree with Ellul when he states that Christianity is not 'a collective thing', Ellul's focus on the contrast between society and the Church may be especially helpful in that it is, again, an emphasis that Newbigin tends to agree with. Though Newbigin may be less critical of the idea of Christendom, he may sound this call in light of his emphasis on the all-powerful authority of the Gospel to confront society in large scale.

3 – Interwoven Layers

"Which worldview does the Church represent? And which reality does the Church seek to engage through mission?"⁶⁵ An immediate challenge is the tendency towards generalisation concerning what should be more aptly described as a plurality of contexts all interwoven and resistant to consolidation and definition. Van Gelder's thesis contrasts from the other authors we have discussed in that he is decidedly more sensitive to the complexities of the pluralistic context. The Church would, for example, need to address issues of nihilism and teen suicide differently than it would the impunity of neo-liberal corporations in developing countries, both of which are related to this new reality called postmodernity.

Newbigin's emphasis on election is in a way a thesis used to underline the urgency at hand as the Church tries to find its game plan in light of a very cacophonous reality. One can also see it interweaving well with his exposition on salvation history. Newbigin emphasises the doctrine of election simply to strengthen the resolve of the Christian responsibility in spreading a universal truth. He develops his thesis on the history of the world as necessarily relevant only in relation to the cross. The Christian

⁶³ Goheen, 'Is Lesslie Newbigin's Model of Contextualization Anticultural?', p. 152.

⁶⁴ Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromily, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 146.

⁶⁵ Van Gelder, p. 495.

community is, therefore, necessarily the point at which the cross and the eschaton connect.

It is always important to guard against the reactionary tendencies within which theology often finds itself entangled. Newbigin's emphasis that the "eternal emphatically *has a history*" (my emphasis)⁶⁶ contrasts with that of theologians such as Hogg and Hocking, who suggest that the path to true knowledge of God comes by way of induction from general religious experience.⁶⁷ Newbigin's contempt for the Enlightenment may, therefore, also be seen as a foundational principle in his development of theology as he seeks to combat this notion of revelation as being anything apart from the "happenings which are grasped by faith as the self-communication of the one whose purpose the story embodies".⁶⁸ Newbigin's theology of mission will undoubtedly find its true strength as it distances itself from its reaction to modernity and is applied in tangible mission.

His critics have tried to classify Newbigin as either too liberal or too conservative. Having been a missionary in India for four decades, Newbigin is undoubtedly sensitive to culture and the beauty that diverse cultures contribute to the world. Yet, culture is what is constructed as humans relate to each other. For Newbigin, human relatedness is essential for salvation – this is cultural. But culture outside of its relation to Christ as centre is essentially corrupt – but not irredeemable. We cannot ignore the voices of those, such as Karl Rahner, who emphasise the need to find common ground upon which the greater Christian fellowship may find unity. Yet, in my view, Raiser makes a grave mistake in thinking that a more Trinitarian affirmation, designed to necessarily soften up hard Christo-centricity, will strengthen the Church. The ecumenical fellowship must hold its members accountable to the centrality of the cross, and in this sense I agree completely with Newbigin.

What then?

The Christian Church finds itself in a time similar to that of the first century, with one imperium (global capitalism) and a plethora of beliefs (pluralism).⁶⁹ Newbigin calls Christians to see the history of the world as the story of God's mission in the world. The Scriptures tell us a story that

⁶⁶ Quoting Wilbert R. Shenk, 'Lesslie Newbigin's Contribution to the Theology of Mission', *TransMission*, Special Edition, (Swindon: Bible Society, 1998), pp. 3-6

⁶⁷ Quoted in T.V. Philip, 'Edinburgh to Salvador: Twentieth Century Ecumenical Missiology', Accessed April 14th, 2003, at http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/researchd.dll/showchapter?chapter_id=1524.

⁶⁸ Hunsberger, p. 117, quoting from Lesslie Newbigin, 'Christ and the World of Religions', in *The Churchman* 97: pp. 16-30. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1966), pp. 62-3, and Lesslie Newbigin, 'The Centrality of Jesus for History', in *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued*, edited by Michael Goulder, (SCM Press, 1979), p. 205.

⁶⁹ Kirk, 'Following Modernity and Postmodernity', p. 232.

precedes history, and yet outlasts history. However, far from functioning apart from history, and not unlike the early Christian communities in the Mediterranean basin, as the contemporary Church lays hold of the impending reality of Christ's reign, it will find itself called to out-think and out-die its generation.⁷⁰

In terms of the applicability of Newbigin's theology of mission, perhaps its most valuable contribution is its emphasis on a new understanding of truth, or 'all-knowing'. Truth, in Newbigin's view happens only in community and is intimately related to believing. In other words, knowing and believing are part of the same reality for Christians as they seek the face of Christ – THE truth – through the teachings of the community. The Scriptures give us a fuller understanding of how God seeks to relate to his people and to his creation. This story, though embedded and told using the particularities of the Israelite community, is also our story; it is, however, only in relationship to the cross that history finds its true meaning.

Equally important, Newbigin's emphasis on election points to the source and purpose of our mission: God. The universal purpose of God's blessing for all humanity is not to be effected by means of a universal revelation to all humanity. In Scripture, the stories are about a chosen people, yet "they are chosen, not for themselves, but the sake of all the few on behalf of the many".⁷¹

Further clarifying his position as neither a 'liberal' or a 'conservative', Newbigin stresses that mission is not the Church's action as it puts forth its own power and wisdom to conquer the world around it; rather, it is *God's action* (my emphases) as its central purpose is to bring nearer to its completion the universal work of Christ, through the power of his Spirit, for the salvation of the world. God has chosen his Church to serve this very purpose.⁷² "The reign of God," Newbigin stresses, "is not a new 'movement' in which those interested may enlist. It is not a cause for support, a cause that might succeed or fail according to the amount of support it attracts."⁷³ The reign of God is an impending reality, confronting people today with the need for a decision.⁷⁴

Newbigin's emphasis seems to lie less in outlining the necessary steps of engagement than in presenting a broader, conceptual vision (subversive, in that it is biblical) in which practical theology may find root.

⁷⁰ Kirk, p. 232

⁷¹ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, p. 34.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 34-9.

⁷⁴ Ibid., *The Open Secret*, p. 34.

In this sense, in his contempt for the Cartesian project, he does not necessarily attempt to disqualify reason and logic as such, as much as he is indeed counteracting the notion that theology can and should be built on a premise of doubt. As the Church attempts to confront the vast challenges that have only just begun to drive the Christian body to re-group and re-think its policies of engagement, it should lay hold to the fact that “God not only creates order out of chaos but also breaks through fixed orders to create ever-new situations of surprise and joy”.⁷⁵

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⁷⁵ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*, p. 150.

Book Reviews

Bill J. Leonard

Baptist Ways: A History

Judson Press, 2003. 480 pp, US\$30

It is proper to enquire for whom any book is written, even allowing that the author may have multiple audiences in mind: only so can we assess how successful he has been in achieving his intentions. Bill Leonard makes clear that he is writing for a contemporary audience, with ‘extensive concentration’ upon American experience, with a self-declared weakness in covering Eastern Europe amongst other areas. We are also told that he was impelled into the task of global history writing by developments within the Southern Baptist Convention. These developments, he says, “required many of us to reclaim, rethink, and rely on our Baptist heritage”. [pp. xiii and xiv]. Accordingly, a wise approach to reading this book will be to see it as a reflection of how a thoughtful Baptist, living in a powerful USA, views the Baptist story, rather than looking for a complete and comprehensive account of developments in Europe. First, then, we need to discover whether the European Baptist experience is faithfully interpreted to our American cousins, and then, more importantly, to take heed of what their story can say to us.

To answer these questions, Leonard enters judiciously into the question of Baptist origins with an even-handed treatment of rival theories – whether to claim an Anabaptist inheritance, or to eschew it in favour of more ordered English separatist parentage? The trouble is that the marathon runner has little time to linger on this question, and so the approach is descriptive rather than evaluative. For example, it is difficult to see how the claims of Glen Stassen [p. 12] in his radical reading of the role of Menno Simons in *Particular Baptist origins* [most bluntly stated in his articles in *Baptist History and Heritage* for the Spring of 1998] can co-exist with B. R. White’s account [p. 13] in *The English Separatist Tradition* [1971]: the texts move in such radically different directions that a choice has to be made between them, or it needs to be shown how the one revises the other.

The first 227 pages record the parallel histories of Baptist genesis and development in the United Kingdom and the USA, for which I would judge the treatment fair. Having taken that story to the eve of the twentieth century, Leonard sketches, more generally, Baptist life in North America (outside the USA) and the Caribbean, tells the story internally of African American Baptists, and picks up on Baptist witness in the Celtic parts of

the UK and the white dominions in the Antipodes, leaving the South African story to a later composite chapter on Africa and Asia.

At this point we have a 30-page study of *Baptists in Europe*, from Oncken to the present day. The shape of the chapter is geographical but giving Oncken his proper priority by starting with Germany, moving through Scandinavia to the Netherlands, and thence to Latin Europe. Poland and Romania precede an analysis of developments in the former Soviet Union which focuses on Russia, leading into separate sections on the Ukraine, Estonia and Georgia. Baptists in Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Albania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, the former Yugoslavia, Belgium, Portugal, the Middle East and Central Asia are sacrificed to oblivion in this summary process, but we were warned that that was to be so, and to be fair the problem is partly with the index which does not include brief references to them.

Reading the European chapter thematically rather than territorially, what does it say? In many situations it is clear that Baptists have roots, if not a pre-history, within the traditions of pietist renewal, allowed as a safety-valve for evangelical enthusiasms by all-inclusive state churches. All too often, however, this became a route into free-church separation, and the founding of Baptist churches in particular. The importance of Bible and Tract distribution is unmistakable, as also the emphasis on lay advocacy, 'Every Baptist a missionary'. The role of persecution, prompting a continent-wide need for external support, including finance, must not take away from the prayerful missionary-mindedness of those Oncken enthused to lose no opportunity in sharing the gospel with others. Their faithfulness saw the movement not only spread throughout the German states but to colonies of German-speaking people throughout Europe. As in the history of the Anabaptist movement three centuries earlier, persecution – a word not lightly used because of the costly sacrifice therein entailed for Baptist brothers and sisters – did not always serve the interests of the persecutors, who thereby became agents of disseminating the Baptist faith by banishing preachers to other territories, where they continued to evangelise with renewed enthusiasm. Given more time one would want to explore the different forms of faithfulness involved in membership of both the underground and over-ground churches, and the heartache involved in deciding whether to register or not with the state authorities, which became a line of separation in several East European situations. Migration of peoples, both within Europe and from Europe, is a dynamic within the story, first in bringing travelling people – sailors, tradesmen, craftsmen – into contact with Baptist preaching, and then in disseminating the faith and later developing strong support communities in North America in

particular. Migration for many was not a luxury, as political boundaries changed around them and they found themselves living on the wrong side of the frontier. From the European base emerged an interest in world-wide missionary endeavour. Leonard, however, also directs our attention to the fact that Europe has again become a mission field, receiving missionaries from such countries as Brazil.

Herbert Petrick is quoted on the enbourgeoisement of the German Baptists at the expense of missionary thrust and a loss of contact with the working classes, a censure that few national unions can avoid [pp. 307-8]. Another emergent theme is that of the differential relationships of national Baptist groups to ecumenical organisations, both inside and outside their boundaries, and how this has changed, and is changing, over time. More recently, a number of unions have suffered splits or losses with the rise of separately organised Pentecostal churches. The bond of fellowship in other situations has been marred by theological differences which have impaired the missionary thrust. Living with the totalitarianism of both the left and the right has been another major part of the European struggle, which, we are reminded, has produced our Baptist martyrs such as Andre Guezic of the French resistance. Distinctive of Baptist witness in Latin Europe has been the need to relate to a dominant Roman Catholic Church, just as believers in the East have had to relate to an Orthodoxy, which, with its ideas of canonical territory, denies them legal existence. Indeed, all state churches in Europe – Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Orthodox – have not been slow to use state authorities against any evangelical group claiming freedom of advocacy for all religious opinions.

Writing this review in Prague, I cannot help noting that within the briefly told story of the EBF are some paragraphs about the International Baptist Theological Seminary, paragraphs which are accurate enough in terms of constitutional changes but hardly capture the promise of so many young people sacrificially training to serve the gospel with dedicated minds and developing scholarship. This is not a remote scholarship but one yearning to be applied across the face of the continent. Their very existence tempts me to move from history to prophecy, in terms of the rich resource for the future which is being incarnated in them.

As Americans will certainly be challenged by reading the European story – and what a rich story it is to tell – so we Europeans need to read the rest of this account to be encouraged and challenged by the story of our fellow believers in both the USA and other parts of the world, as we move into a postmodern, and in some cases, a post-denominational world.

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Nancey Murphy

The Nordenhaug Lectures 2003, *Theology in a Postmodern Age*.

IBTS Occasional Publication, No 3. Prague, CZ: IBTS, 2003

Groundbreaking research in the field of theology is a rare event. Absorbing summaries of a series of widely acclaimed academic work are even rarer. This is exactly what this recent publication aims to do. It is a creative and succinct account of Dr Nancey Murphy's own scholarship, mapping unfamiliar or uncharted terrain of Anglo-American postmodern thought. The theme of her lecture series is the use of philosophy in theology in the postmodern age. It is impressive to see how the results of her earlier academic work are integrated into her latest and most innovative philosophical investigations.

The first lecture is a summary of Murphy's prior work on the shift in the structures of modern thought: those of knowledge, language, and causation. Her interest is not purely philosophical; she responds to philosophical challenges first and foremost as a Christian. Therefore at the centre of her work is the concern about the relationship between philosophy and theology. She argues that Anglo-American postmodern thought provides conceptual resources for overcoming the unbridgeable dichotomy between liberal and conservative theologies.

In her second and third lectures, she explores postmodern alternatives, specifically to modern theological anthropology. In her second lecture, she focuses on the problems created by modern dualism (or trichotomism) and materialistic physicalism, both of which, according to her, are reductionist. She develops a plausible proposal for the non-reductive physicalist account of human nature compatible with a sound biblical reading and the recent developments in modern science.

Her final lecture turns to the image of the inner self as located within the mind or soul. She challenges the extensive critique of Augustinian tradition's conception of the dualistic account of human nature and the 'inwardness' of human spirituality. She suggests that holistic physicalist anthropology, endorsed in her second lecture, is a better alternative for the account of the self as well as for Christian spirituality and discipleship, particularly for the adherents of the baptistic tradition.

Murphy's lecture series presents a wealth of theological insights. Research students and scholars may wish to pay particular attention to the last part of the third lecture where she helpfully outlines a number of research proposals for theological investigation naturally streaming from her assessment of current philosophical shifts. One may agree or disagree

with her proposals, but they leave no thinking Christian indifferent. If the purpose of the Nordenhaug Lectures is to provoke critical thinking on important theological issues, Dr Nancey Murphy can be credited with an excellent achievement.

The Revd Dr Parush R Parushev
Academic Dean and Director of Applied Theology
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